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DIME
THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE
APRIL
WESTERN
MAGAZINE
BLOOD AND BULLETS BUILD A HERD
SMASHING NOVEL OF MOUNTAINEER COMMON
by RAY HAPZIGER
FRIAR ROBUSTO'S GOLD-CAMP PILGRIMAGE
A NOVELETTE OF THE SIX-SHOOTER FADRE
by HARRY F. OLMSTED

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MAY ISSUE PUBLISHED APRIL 1st!

VOLUME XXIX APRIL, 1941 NUMBER 4

Complete Western Novel

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It was like Deacon Colter, mountaineer cowman, to yelp to high heaven against his neighbors' plan to raid the Sunk Lakes farmers' winter feed. . . . But Chan Gorman had bitterly learned that when the Deacon shouted loudest for peace—that was the time to load your gun, and watch sharp for a bullet in the back!

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—And—

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No one can ever accuse the Western men who write our stories of being arm-chair authors!

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The thrilling picture-saga of Harry Love, who put a swift bullet-period to the blood-stained career of "The Bandit Butcher of the Californias."

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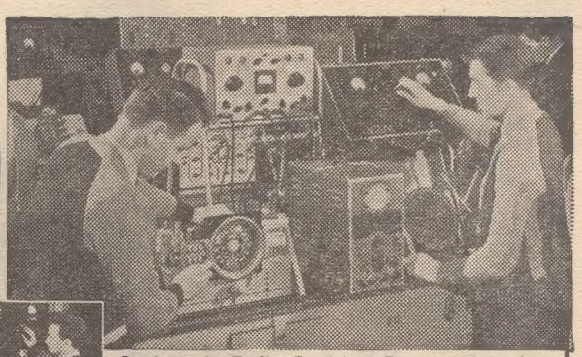

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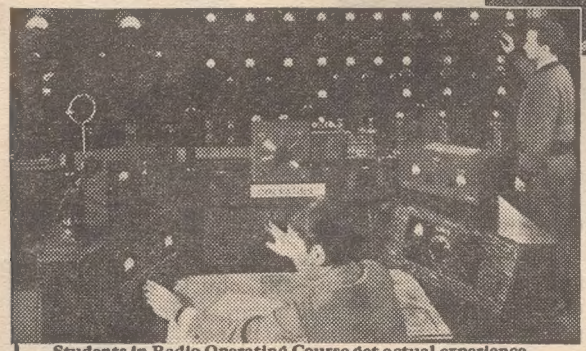

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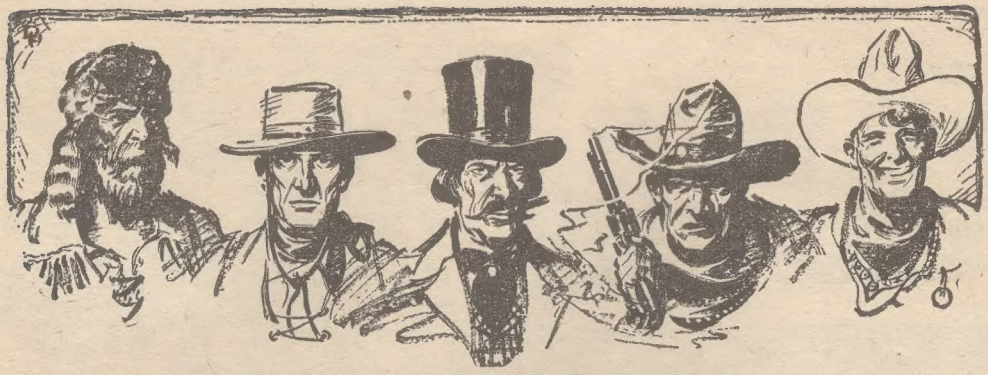

IN THE SADDLE

YOU'VE often heard us make our brag that *Dime Western* authors know their West. We're proud of that fact, for in no other story-writing field is such knowledge so vitally important. No man can write convincingly of horses and cows and the open range unless he knows horses and cows and the thousand and one intimate, colorful details of the round-up and the branding pen—the chuck wagon, bunkhouse and night circle. The most vividly realistic accounts of gunmen and gun-fights are invariably written by those authors who have themselves smelled gun-smoke.

Knowledge of his chosen field is any good author's best stock in trade, and for that reason many of our writers who have spent their entire lives in the West still keep pretty constantly on the move in search of fresh scenes and places (locales, they call them) in which to place future stories.

Harry F. Olmsted returned recently from just such a foray, and his letter describing the trip is so packed with color and incident that we're going to share it with you readers. When next you hear us sounding off about "Western authors who know and love the West," perhaps you'll admit that we've backed our brag —at least so far as Mr. Olmsted is concerned.

Dear *Dime Western* Gang:

Just back from the unplanned luxury of another month in New Mexico. Really should have resisted the temptation, but that country is my weakness and I wouldn't wonder I might settle there some day. Had a chance to join an expedition to the San Juan River, in Utah, to visit a seldom seen ancient castle—Poncho House. Out to Gallup, north to Shiprock, Cortez, Monticello, Blanding, then west to Bluff—now a ghost town but once the richest per-capita stronghold of the Mormons. Thence out to Mexican Hat—home of that intrepid master of the Colorado and San Juan Rivers—Whitewater Norman Nevills. Norman ran the Colorado from Green River this year. And the rapids of the San Juan twice. If you ever want an experience you will never forget, join one of his trips down the big river, from Wyoming to Boulder Dam. It won't cost you much and the payoffs in thrills and memories, tales of the canyon, scenery, renewed vitality are priceless.

Left Mexican Hat Lodge, run by Norman's parents (and about the nicest accommodations you can imagine) and took the longest twenty-six mile road in the world. It has kept white men away from these great ruins. Five hours later, we checked in on Chin Lee Creek—a mile and a half from our objective. Loneliest place in the world, I guess, guarded only by a Navajo who travels armed with a foot-long knife and a pot metal pistol. He blames the white man for the flu, which wiped out his family in 1918, and which burned out his brain. Hosteen Clitsoe Begay. A sweet thought as you compose yourself for sleep after a hard day. The ruins proved to be wonderful, its ancient dump pile a prolific mine of interesting artifacts. Shot in the night as we prepare for bed—far off, but nonetheless spine tickling as we know that Dummy (Clitsoe Begay) is abroad among the ruins in the moonlight. Lone owl-hoot in the night brings the company out of their beds. False alarm, or maybe Dummy is in a good humor. Off to the ruins after breakfast, with O'Brien of the Associated Press photographing the incredible houses in their eyries and the matchless petroglyphs. At four P. M. gathering clouds prompt Norman's warning. Poncho House is a fatal place to be storm bound in. Twenty-six miles of hell covered in darkness—a real

(Continued on page 6)

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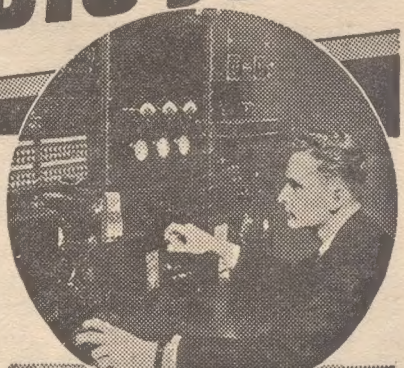

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(Continued from page 4)

test of patience and endurance. Just beat the storm to Mexican Hat. Rain bound one day. O'Brien leaves at night and spends the dark hours stuck in a rising stream. Nice spot. We found the evidence next day, when we shove through four flooded streams. Snow all the way to Durango, Colorado. Spend a day with friends in Aztec and then back to Kirk's, in Manuelito. Don't know where the time went, but here I am home, one month from the day of departure. What fun to buckle down again.

Herewith *Friar Robusto's Gold Camp Pilgrimage,* which I wrote rough in Manuelito. Hope it suits. (Editor's note: You'll find this fine story on page 44 of this issue!) Note what you say about lengths and will work hard to get you more copy immediately. With kindest wishes, I am

Sincerely,

Harry F. Olmsted.

Do you agree with us that an author who spends most of his spare time on such trips as this must know pretty well the West of which he writes? And Mr. Olmsted's case is typical of the other top-hand Western authors whose colorful stories appear so frequently in the pages of this magazine.

Walt Coburn, for instance, will still travel five hundred miles to sit in the judges' stand at a good rodeo, though he could spend the time much more profitably at home at his typewriter. Walt, you see, was born and raised on his father's ranch, the famous Circle C of Montana. He was riding range in shortened stirrups when, as he himself says, he was "knee-high to a grasshopper." At an age when most of us were still shooting marbles in our back yards, Walt was riding to round-up and, on occasion, helping to hold a nervous herd on a stormy night—with the blue lightning sig-zagging across the black Montana sky and the cattle all set to booger at the strike of a match.

Do you doubt for a minute that Walt knows what he's writing about when he sits down and creates, for instance, a scene like the following?

Brady found Sandy's arm in the darkness, whispering into her ear—her hair brushing his lips.

"You got your gun, pardner? Then git in behind somethin'. Listen!"

Now they both heard the sounds that had awakened them from sound sleep. A scraping noise at the front door. A man groaning. His voice sounded weak and thick with pain. Muffled.

"Brady . . . . Brady . . . . I'm hurt . . . . bad . . . . They got me!"

Despite Tex's flat assertion that Brady's wild outlaw dad, Bob Barnaby, was dead, Brady and Sandy had never let themselves believe it. They had hoped that he would show up some night. He might come to them, they knew, like some hunted animal. He might be wounded. . . .

"Could that be him, Brady?"

"Who else could it be?" the boy whispered hoarsely. "Git back in your room. I'm goin' to open the door."

Brady lifted a corner of a canvas curtain and peered out into the night. There was no moon and it was pitch black out there.

The man outside the door groaned again. Louder. His voice came through the thick door.

"Brady! Let me in! I'm all shot to hell!"

Brady gripped his six-shooter and slid back the heavy wooden bar. Cautiously he opened the door.

Not fifty feet away, from behind the pile of cordwood, a gun spat flame. The man who claimed he'd been shot was crouched against the log wall near the door. He let out a sharp grunt and began shooting. The man at the woodpile yelled harshly to Brady.

"Shut that door, you bonehead! It's a bushwhacker trap!"

Sandy grabbed Brady's shirt and yanked him back inside and slammed the door shut.

Out there in the moonless dark two guns kept roaring. Then the shooting ended. The silence was ominous.

Brady's arm was around Sandy's shoulders and he felt her shiver as she crouched against him. . . .

Do you think any man who hadn't as a kid spent just such lonely, peril-fraught nights in some bleak line camp of the Montana badlands could create that kind of living, believable, human drama?

That scene, incidentally, is taken from Mr. Coburn's next feature novel. You'll find it, in case you're interested, in the story called "Courage of the Barnaby Clan," which will appear in the next issue of this magazine. We believe that in many respects it is one of the most moving tales Walt Coburn has ever told.

—THE EDITORS.

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As the cliff-side fell with the crash of an artillery salvo, the cavalcade spurred desperately up the canyon. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Son of the Eagle Breed

FOR nine years a witches' hell-broth of deadly hatred had been brewing between young Chan Gorman and Big Brad Bayliss, and now it was set to boil over in all its red-hot, seething violence. Since that day when Big Brad's hairy arms had wielded a club to beat his wife's ribby orphan nephew,

Smashing Novel of Mountaineer Cowmen

Blood and Bullets Build a Herd

Nine years of back-breaking toil earned Chan Gorman his Box A herd. . . . But the only bill-of-sale those lawless mountaineer cowmen honored was one written in blood and sealed with bushwhack lead!

By RAY NAFZIGER

Chan Gorman, half to death, hatred for Brad had flamed steadily inside the younger man, growing as his shoulders widened and his muscles lengthened and firmed to steel.

Today, it was a different lad Big Brad was beating, a runty boy from town brought out to drive the team for the big Mormon hay stacker crew who were putting up the first cut of alfalfa below Sunk Lakes reservoir. The men were hurrying to get a stack completed before rain fell from the black sky. The town boy, terrified by Big Brad's furious curses, had tangled his team in the tugs.

Chan saw Big Brad grab up the homemade horsewhip and start to run down the fear-petrified lad. His huge arm rose and fell, punctuating the boy's cries with the crack of the whip's tough hackberry stock. Chan Gorman, coming up swiftly behind Big Brad, seized and bent the big man's brawny right arm far back and wrenched away the whip.

Big Brad's rust-flecked hazel eyes glared into the steely ones of Gorman. Momentarily he forgot the boy he had been beating, as he swung on his big tree-trunk legs.

"Damn you," growled Chan Gorman, "you ought to be stripped and horsewhipped until your ornery hide oozes blood."

Big Brad's eyes were bloodshot with rage and the skin below his stubble beard flushed red. He was two inches taller and many pounds heavier than Chan Gorman, but his shoulders were no wider and he looked clumsy, and muscle-bound against the loose-jointed younger man.

From the next field came the clatter of the mowing machine driven by old Lafe Peabody, with whom Chan Gorman batched. Big Brad's husky blood-nephews, Ira and Tom Bayliss, and his hired hand, Tiger Leish, jumped off the stack and came on the run. That gave Big Brad three witnesses for whatever happened here, while Chan's nearest friend was Lafe Peabody in the adjoining field.

So it's showdown, eh!" Big Brad rasped. "We victualed you and clothed you here in the valley, because you were the son of my wife's sister, and this is the return we git. Your paw was a no-good hill cowboy outa them mountains," he went on, jerking a hand toward the line of white-topped peaks to the southwest. "A loafin', tramp cowboy who hoped to feather hisself a soft nest down here my marryin' a girl due to inherit a farm. Your paw figgered he was too good to do any work that couldn't be done from a saddle. And you're his kind—the loafin' son of a loafin', no-good mountain cowboy."

"You're a damn' liar, Brad," Gorman said hotly. "My father was twice the man you are, at any kind of work you want to name. And me, I've done a man's share of work here in this Sunk Lakes Colony since I was fourteen. Winters and summers I've pitched as many forkfuls of hay as you. And on top, I've broke the horses and mules you hay-hands were afraid to try to handle.

"You whopped me unconscious once when I was a kid and throwed me in a shed, hopin' I'd die. If Lafe Peabody hadn't looked after me that time, likely I'd of cashed in. And now, just to teach you to beat up kids, I'm handin' you a dose of your own medicine!"

★ ★ ★

AS CHAN GORMAN stripped off his shirt to fight, he was looking at the Kit Carson range beyond the Sunk Lakes country, with its black belts of pine and spruce under the bald granite slopes that seemed to support the clouded sky. The Kit Carsons had been his father's country, and Chan felt now that strength was flowing to him from those high peaks.

If he licked Big Brad he would have use for that added strength, as well as for the fighting skill that he had learned in the three past winters . . .

Sailor Adkins, with the battered head and the magic in hands and feet of a ring veteran, had been cook at the feeding camp. He had roped off a ring in a stable where, beneath flickering lanterns, the young fellows of the Colony had worked out under his instruction. All had been husky fighters, but Chan Gorman had topped them all. When Sailor Adkins left he had promised Chan big money out in the ring world, but Chan Gorman had

laughed. There were better ways of making a living than slugging other men unconscious.

Big Brad led with a whistling long-armed right that could have dropped a two-year-old steer. Chan slipped easily away from it and crashed knuckles to Big Brad's temple. The blow traveled only six inches, but Bayliss staggered and almost went down.

Recovering, he started a bull-like rush, arms two whirling windmills out of which came a hurricane of wild blows that somehow never landed squarely. Always Chan's elbows or shoulders blocked them, and steadily in return came savage jolts to Big Brad's face, to his ribs, to his wind. Blood ran from his smashed nostrils and his left eye closed.

Big Brad retreated toward the hay stack, and Chan followed, stepping into a pile of loose hay. For an instant off balance, one of Big Brad's wild swings ramrodded into his chest, sending him staggering back. Big Brad, tired of hitting at a shadow, saw his chance. He rushed, closing his big arms about the small of the younger man's back, intending to snap Gorman's spine.

Chan, tearing an arm free, slapped down on the back of Bayliss' big neck as one would kill a jackrabbit. Big Brad went down, breathing heavily through blood-clogged nostrils. Then as he lay there, Big Brad's clawing fingers closed about the handle of a pitchfork. Suddenly he came to his feet, gripping the fork in both hands.

"Got you now!" he bellowed exultantly. "Goin' to kill you!"

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A PITCHFORK is a dangerous weapon. The sharpened tines of smooth, bright steel can be as deadly as a bayonet. Chan Gorman saw the death gleaming in those steel points, but he wasn't running. Another fork was stuck in the side of the stack. He stepped back and whipped it out.

Glaring at the weapon with which Chan had matched his own, Big Brad growled, hesitated, and then lunged in. The tines of the two forks met and caught. For ten seconds, with the fury of two bull elks battling with locked horns, the pair tugged and heaved. Under the strain the fork handles bent to the breaking point until Big Brad managed to withdraw his weapon.

He batted out savagely, hoping to make an opening for a deadly thrust of the tines. For half a minute the two men sparred with the forks.

Lantern-jawed Tiger Leish and Big Brad's beefy nephews stood nearby, watching the duel with popeyed fascination. In the next field oldish Lafe Peabody had stopped the mowing machine and was running across the field, yelling. Neither Chan Gorman nor Big Brad heard him.

Repeatedly the savagely clanging fork heads and tines met. Blood dripped from Chan's knuckles as a tine point skinned away the flesh. They circled warily, Big Brad panting, badly winded.

"Goin' to kill you!" he muttered again and rushed in to jab the deadly steel through Gorman's viscera. Again the footwork taught Gorman by the old boxer, Sailor Adkins, served Chan well. He slipped aside and feinted to the left.

As Big Brad's weapon rose to meet the thrust, Chan dropped both hands to the end of the handle and swung the fork like a long club. Big Brad tried to dodge but the steel head of Chan's fork smashed the hairy arm at the elbow as Brad screamed in anguish. His fork slipped from his grasp and in throwing himself backward, he fell flat on the ground face upward.

In that moment Chan Gorman could have driven his weapon full into Big Brad Bayliss' hairy chest. Instead he swept Big Brad's fallen weapon out of reach and then stood over Bayliss, his fork tines a few inches from the fallen man. The nephews and Tiger Leish made no move to interfere. Tiger Leish had the evil name as a gunman, but he wanted no fighting that used cold steel.

Lafe Peabody, wrinkled, white-bearded, puffing from the run, came up to put restraining hands on Chan's arms as he stood over Big Brad.

"Don't do it!" he wheezed. "Killin' a man's something you never get over. For God's sake, don't do it, Chan!"

Slowly the red mist faded from Gor-

man's eyes, and he lowered the fork.

Big Brad, staring at Gorman, moved backward like a crab. His nephews and Tiger Leish lifted him to his feet, and they began walking him like a drunken man toward the farm house across the field. A few big, cool drops of rain splashed down. A little distance away, he stopped the men supporting him and turned to face Chan.

"You hear me?" Big Brad shouted hoarsely, "I told you I'd kill you, an' some day I'm doing it!"

• • •

RAIN began sluicing from the black sky. Chan and Lafe hurried out a huge tarpaulin to cover the open part of the long stack. When they finished, Chan saw a fork on the ground. He picked it up and flung it into the stack as if it were a javelin. He had pitched his last forkful of hay. He had done with sweating down here in the Sunk Lakes Colony—through with the weary days of stacking prairie, alfalfa and clover hay.

"I reckon it had to bust some time—this scrap 'tween you and Big Brad," said old Lafe Peabody thoughtfully as he and Chan Gorman walked through the rain to their house. "Big Brad had a licking coming to him. But now one of you will have to leave the Colony. It's the rule here that when two men get in danger of killin' one another, one's got to pull out. This fight'll have to be talked over tonight at the meetin' and I'm afraid they'll ask you to go even though he started the fight. His nephews and Tiger Leish will lie for him."

"I been aiming to leave anyway the last of August, when I'm twenty-one," said Chan. He gestured at the mountains through the rain. "I'm heading for the Kit Carsons. I don't aim to spend my life wearin' out pitchforks stacking hay. I like horses and cows and open range. There'll be no kick from me at leaving."

"I know that," said Lafe. "But I hate to see you quit under a cloud. Anyhow, come tonight to say good-bye to Caleb Powers and the others at the meeting."

Chan nodded. Going to the Powers place would give him a chance to say good-bye to Lida Powers. And he wasn't going away without seeing Lida, the granddaughter of Caleb Powers who had organized the Sunk Lakes Colony, building the dam to irrigate a corner of the desert under the ramparts of Battle Mountain.

"You've been like a eagle with its feet hobbled down here on the flats," went on Lafe. "I know it's in you to go, but I kinda hate to see you go into the Carsons. Things has changed from your dad's time. The ranchers up there are a hard lot. Used to be that your dad had a lot of friends in the Carsons, but you've got only one relative now, Rush Colter, your pa's cousin. I don't hear much good about him."

"They say hard things about all the mountain riders," agreed Gorman, "but I don't believe 'em."

He had always made heroes of the bronzed cowboys he had seen riding down from the Kit Carsons in fall, hazing their herds down to the desert range, racing horses down steep slopes with careless ease.

Always he had dreamed of becoming one of that reckless crew. They were a different breed from the farmers in the Sunk Lakes Colony. Chan looked on the mountain cowboys as the successors to the brave, adventurous mountain men, of whom the greatest was Kit Carson, after whom the range had been named.

While the rain pounded on the roof he gathered his belongings. Free at last, he had never been happier. Leaving the Colony before he was twenty-one was like getting out of prison ahead of time. He had a roping saddle, a bedroll and three good cow-horses that he'd raised from colts. They were all he needed to get a job in the Kit Carsons as a cowboy, where the blue peaks towered above the rolling masses of white clouds.

After scrubbing, he put on new levis, checkered shirt and finally his father's fine shop-made high-heeled boots. Before he had died, Chan's father had told his son to wear them some day. They were still a little too big, but Chan would grow into them.

"You'll have to be looking out for Big Brad Bayliss," said Lafe as they ate supper. "He's passed his promise to kill you, and Big Brad sticks by his promises.

Likely next time he'll try it from ambush. Maybe he'll hire Tiger Leish to do the job. Tiger's a old-time gunman. Look out for him and Big Brad whereever you go. For one thing, Big Brad don't like the way Lida Powers has been lookin' at you. Nor the way you look at her."

A slow flush spread over Chan's face. He had thought he had hidden his feelings toward Lida Powers. Everyone in the Sun Lakes Colony thought Lida was going to marry the widower, Big Brad. The match had the approval of old Caleb Powers, Lida's grandfather. But it hadn't Chan Gorman's approval.

Yet he realized he had nothing to offer the girl. All he owned was three horses, while Big Brad worked a fine farm. But he was a kid no longer and he'd have something before long. He'd get a start somehow, and marry Lida Powers!

CHAPTER TWO

Stake for a Wildling

THAT night Chan Gorman rode up to the big log house of Caleb Powers under Battle Mountain. Lafe had gone ahead an hour before. Chan didn't care to attend the meeting; he was going merely to hear the verdict—his banishment from the valley. And he welcomed it.

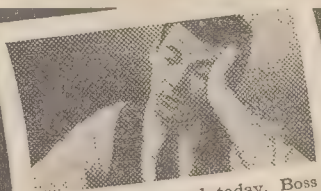
He didn't intend even to ask for wages, although he had worked hard in the Colony since he was fourteen, building irrigation canals from the Sunk Lakes dam, cleaning ditches, planting, making hay, and working with the horses. For all this he was entitled to wages, but his thoughts were concerned solely with seeing Lida Powers as he rode into the Powers farm.

The girl, like Chan, was an orphan and more than earned her keep in her grandfather's household. Men and women alike worked hard in the Sunk Lakes Colony. The women besides cooking, baking and washing, made practically all the clothing and tended gardens and dairies, as well as doing other chores.

Lida Powers did all of these, and Chan resented it. Women shouldn't have to work so hard, at least no girl like Lida Powers, who had hair like flax, and eyes that were as deep a blue as the unclouded sky over the Kit Carson range. No wonder most of the unmarried men in the Colony had courted her, although conceding that Big Brad who was working the big farm he had inherited from his father-in-law, had the rail in the race.

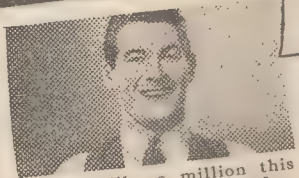
A few rigs and wagons were tied at the Powers corral, but most of the men had walked across fields. As Chan dismounted he heard an angry bellowing coming from the living room where old Caleb Powers presided over the meet-

Mr. R---
makes a
Confession



1 Almost got fired today. Boss caught me napping at my desk. The trouble is I need a laxative. But I hate to take the awful stuff.

2 Tom told me to try Ex-Lax and I bought a box on my way home. Took some before turning in for the night. A cinch to take — it tastes just like chocolate!



3 Feel like a million this morning. Ex-Lax worked fine. Didn't upset me or keep me awake last night . . . Boy, watch me tear into my work today!

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle!* No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowelmovement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for *every* member of the family.

10¢ and 25¢

ing. Chan scowled as he identified Big Brad Bayliss' voice.

Crossing to the kitchen, he knocked. Lida came to the door, slim and arrow-straight. Seeing Chan, she stepped out into the darkness, closing the door.

"You might have been killed today," she whispered.

"I might have been," he admitted. "Brad has a bad temper. But I'm still alive, and I'm glad it happened. I've got an excuse now to leave the valley. All of the people here except Brad have been good to me, but I've been wanting to get away."

Looking at her in the dim light, he reached out suddenly and taking her hands, blurted out what was in his head. "Look, you aren't going to marry Big Brad, are you? He's not fit for you."

"Marry Brad? No. I hate him. But grandfather has pointed out often that Brad is a good farmer and can give me a good home. I've got to marry someone; there's no place in the Colony for a woman who's not married."

"This Colony isn't a fit place for any woman. They work too hard. Men and women both kill themselves with work here—and for what? They haven't got enough cattle to eat up half the hay they stack every year."

"They've got to work hard to pay off the debt that's still on the land and dam," pointed out the girl. "There's a big payment due next spring. Some day the Colony will be free of debt and we won't have to slave like this."

"I hope so. But I'm going to get myself some cattle and run them up in the Kit Carsons as my father did. I'd rather spend sixteen hours a day working on a cattle ranch than eight on a farm. I hate these farms and I like the mountains."

"I like them too," she admitted. "If I were a boy I'd go away with you."

"Do the next best thing, he urged. "Wait for me. It won't be so long. I'll work harder, thinking that you are waiting. In a year or two I'll have my start —a few cattle, a mountain ranch—and I'll come back for you . . . If you'll wait."

Her voice was low but firm. "Yes, Chan. I'll wait."

His arms were tight about her when Lafe Peabody came out to tell Chan they wanted him in the big beamed living room.

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ALL OF the older men of the Colony were there, sitting in their working clothes. Here in informal council the matters of the Sunk Lakes Colony were discussed and decided on. The Colony settled its own disputes.

Old Caleb Powers sat in the corner under the lamp, his white beard flowing over his chest. He was past eighty, but he still did a man's work in the fields. Big Brad Bayliss sat in a dark corner, to hide his smashed face and sullen eyes.

"Chan," rumbled Caleb Powers' deep voice, "today you fought with one of your neighbors. You might have committed murder. Since Lafe told us that you wish to leave, we have not inquired into the cause of the quarrel. Your heart has never been in our fields here, although you have always worked willingly. You have a way with horses and cattle; ranch work may be more to your liking. Legally we would not have to pay you wages for your work here, but we have decided you are entitled to them. Also your father brought a few Box A cattle here from the mountains, but they were mortgaged to the Colony for land he bought. They belong to the Colony. We're going to propose a settlement with you. We will give you, as your wages, one hundred cows and calves of the Box A brand."

"He ain't entitled to 'em!" bawled Big Brad. "I been takin' care of them Box A's ever since Dan Gorman died. I ain't givin' 'em up to a kid that tried to kill me."

"You have taken care of the cattle, Brad, but you have also sold off the steers each year," said Caleb. "Chan's father brought in good cattle; we have used their calves for breeding stock. Because he is an orphan, we are not taking advantage of him. Chan, do you consider a hundred Box A cows with their calves a fair settlement for your wages?"

"More than fair, sir," said Chan.

He was overwhelmed by the offer. A hundred Box A cows and calves could be the start of a herd that could grow to five hundred in a few years. It would cut short the period of waiting.

"I take it that you intend to move these cattle up into the Kit Carsons this summer," Powers went on. "I'd advise you to be careful. There's a slick bunch of crooks running cattle in the Carsons. A mighty tough crowd."

"I'll be on the lookout, sir," said Chan. He looked about the room, at John and Will Walworth, at the four Johnson brothers, the Hudneys, the Chases, and all the older men of the Colony. For years they had toiled against heavy odds here in the Sunk Lakes country, and they still faced heavy debts. He pitied them and felt a sudden pang of regret that he had to leave them.

One by one, excepting for Brad Bayliss, they came up to shake hands with him, to wish him luck, to ask him to come back to visit them often.

He wanted to see Lida again, to tell her of his good fortune, but the kitchen was dark. The girl had promised to wait, and with that he had to be satisfied.

He rode home silently with Lafe. Lafe was heavy-hearted at losing Chan, who had been almost like a son to him. The next day the two rode to cut out a hundred head of Box A cows from the big sloughs where the Colony cattle were pastured in the summer.

"Watch out for Big Brad and Tiger Leish," Lafe warned him again as he shook hands.

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CHAN moved his little herd past Sunk Lakes reservoir through Rotten Rock Canyon, over Battle Mountain and across the next valley heading for the Kit Carsons. With the cattle he was taking two horses packed with blankets, grub and supplies enough to last him a month or two. He nursed the cows and their calves along slowly for four days until he came to a canyon up which all the cattle were trailed into the upper parks on the north side of the Carsons.

Up this canyon he hazed his herd, climbing steadily through forests of young lodgepoles and Ponderosa pine. In the late afternoon of the second day he saw directly ahead a sort of huge gateway formed by two towering cliffs, with a little foam-flecked river boiling down between them. Chan Gorman relaxed in the saddle contentedly. These mountains were home to him, as they had been home to his father.

His lead cattle had reached the bottom of a huge rockslide when, from the gateway above, came the crash of a rifle, and a bullet screamed off a boulder ten feet from Chan. Again came the whine of a slug, but Chan was already out of the saddle, flopping into the rocks, Winchester in his hands.

The Box A cows and their calves turned tail and stampeded back down the canyon. One big white-faced cow was bawling, tossing her head, with blood running from a bullet gash in her neck.

Enraged, Chan slid his Winchester barrel over a boulder, watching for the telltale lift of smoke from the ambushing rifle. But no more shots came. The rifleman seemed satisfied with stopping the advance of the herd. Thinking it over, Chan figured the shots had been sent only as warning; for the man could easily have dumped him clean out of the saddle.

But no one was stopping him from taking his cattle to the higher mesa, and slowly he began working his way toward the jumbled boulder slide. Before he had crawled more than a few yards, there was a clatter of shod hoofs on the trail below him. Down canyon he saw a party of men with laden pack horses stringing up past his scattered cattle. They must have heard the shots, but their rifles were still in the saddle scabbards.

The lead rider was a tall, smooth-shaven man in his fifties, with a big mouth, big eyes and bulging features. Behind him followed two tall, powerful riders—his sons, judging by their faces, and a stumpy, wide-shouldered cowboy brought up the rear of a loaded string of pack horses.

Chan showed himself as the cavalcade came up.

"What yuh mean, bringin' cattle up into this country, stranger?" bellowed the older man. "Somebody firin' at yuh, was they? Hell, they'd ort to killed yuh. Who are yuh anyway?"

"What the hell is it to you who I am?" Chan returned, watching them, rifle in

his hands. "These mountains don't belong to anybody."

At that the man reined up his horse and dropped a hand to his holster. Staring puzzledly at Chan, he leaned forward and put both hands on his saddle horn, while a grin spread over his big face.

"Damned if it ain't the same voice!" the older man exclaimed. "I place you now. I bet your name is Gorman—Dan Gorman's son!"

Chan did not relax his watchfulness. "My name's Gorman," he said shortly. "What of it?"

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THIS of it," the big man replied. "You and me is relations. Dan Gorman and me was cousins." He got down and held out a big paw. "I'm Rush Colter. These is my sons, Asa and Zachary. You look a heap like your pa, an' you got the same quick way of talkin'. I thought a heap o' Dan. Many a summer I camped in these mountains with him.

"I allus thought we'd be seein' yuh up here some day. You're like us—one of the eagle breed. And while yuh can clip a eagle's wings, when they git growed out, the eagle goes soarin' off to the high pinnacles. Your pa was the first rancher to bring cattle up into this high country. He opened the trail up this canyon; blowed out a lot o' boulders that had it blocked. It's called Gorman Canyon—named after him. But some of the ranchers, like Old Man McClintock that range cattle on this side o' the Kit Carsons, figger there's been too many cattle up here lately. They keep a gun guard posted here to shoo wanderin' cowmen away. I don't hold with such vi'lence myself, but I can't do nothin' about it. Likely it was Old Man McClintock or one of his hands that fired them shots.

"Anyhow, we got to make room for the son of Dan Gorman. We'll camp here tonight and talk it over. Asa and Zachary, go gather them cows."

The cattleman led the way to a little open place near the stream. "Unpack your horses," he invited Chan, "and I'll rustle supper. We'll have steaks off a shoulder of mountain sheep. We never eat beef summers. Elk, deer, mountain sheep to be had for the shootin'. And trout so thick you can pull 'em out by the barrel. These Kit Carsons is a reg'lar paradise in summer. You're goin' to be glad you cut out from the hayhands that sweat their lives away down at Sunk Lakes."

Chan unpacked his horses. The Colter pack string came up, in charge of a grizzled veteran cowboy, Joe Dock.

After supper they all squatted about the fire, with the stream sounding pleasantly in their ears. Chan thought of the hot, close nights of Sunk Lakes Valley, and he lay back contentedly in the grass. If it hadn't been for Big Brad Bayliss he'd be down there handling a pitchfork all summer. He reckoned he owed Big Brad a present.

"Yessir; you're one feller that got a right to have your cattle in the Carsons," said Colter. "But you can't push 'em in against the gang up here. Men like old man McClintock would kill your cattle and you too. Only way I see is to take those cattle in as mine and say you're my new hand. How old are you?"

"Twenty. Be twenty-one last part of August."

"And this is June. It'll be easy then. You give me a bill of sale for your cattle so I can show it to old man McClintock and the rest. We'll drive the cows on up to Roaring Creek and you'll camp with Joe Dock and watch after your herd.

"That's the only safe way for you and for me both. We want you up here with us now, boy; and next fall we'll want you with us down on the desert. Deacon Colter they call me. I'm no church man, but I allus try to do right. On Sundays me and my boys try to keep from workin', Sunday bein' the Lord's day. But they ain't no reason for anybody to trust me, and your not bein' of age makes it so you don't need to. Joe, hand me that piece of wrappin' paper. I'll write out a bill of sale for your cattle, Chan, transferin' title to me. You'll sign it and my sons and Joe Dock will witness it."

A trace of suspicion came to Chan and the Deacon saw it on his face.

"Why, son," he said roughly, "I ain't aimin' to cheat you, and I couldn't anyway. You ain't of age. A minor can't transfer title to property. If you was of age I wouldn't let you sign no bill of sale to me, 'cause if something happened to me

my heirs might not be as honest as I am. But with you bein' only twenty, any bill of sale you'd sign ain't worth the paper it's writ on. Any lawyer would tell you that. But it'll protect me from tough hombres like old man McClintock that might shoot me if they knowed I was slippin' in a outsider on the range. After I've showed that paper to 'em we'll burn it."

Chan's suspicion melted away. He liked Deacon Colter and trusted him. He knew that the law read that minors couldn't transfer title to property. No court would recognize as legal a sale made by a minor.

He was among friends here; among kinsmen. "Sure, I'll sign it, Deacon," he said. "If I can't trust my own father's cousin, I can't trust anybody. Write out that bill of sale."

CHAPTER THREE

Cabin Ambush

AFTER the bill of sale had been signed and witnessed, they sat about the camp fire, talking. The talk was mostly about the Kit Carsons. Plenty men had lost their lives in the Kit Carsons—in early blizzards or late storms, in land and rockslides, and in falls while riding dangerous slopes. And plenty men had been killed in gun-fights too. In one summer alone, six had cashed in their chips.

"They was sheepmen," said the Deacon. "They brought their range lice up here and a week later the carcasses of five thousand sheep was layin' at the foot of a cliff. The herders was killed and thrown over with 'em. All the cattle ranchers up here proved they was forty miles away at the time the killin' was done. Old man McClintock had a gang of outsiders to come in and do the butcherin'." The Deacon shook his head. "I don't hold with such vi'lence myself. I never mix in no trouble like that. A man's life is worth more'n all the cattle and sheep that could be ranged in these mountains."

The Deacon's talk turned to pleasanter things. That summer his sons would take Chan on a climb up the highest peak of the Kit Carsons. And they'd go to see the cabin Kit Carson and a fellow trapper had built when they were trapping beaver in the country.

After they had rolled in, Chan lay awake thinking of the Sunk Lakes people. He thought too of Big Brad's threat to kill him, and remembered Lafe Peabody's warning that Big Brad wasn't bluffing. But he put that aside, seeing in the dying camp-fire Lida Powers' face. He could marry her next summer and bring her up from the sweltering heat, the glaring sun and back-breaking toil of the farm colony. He'd start in right away to built a log cabin for their home next summer. And together they'd ride over these slopes. . . .

The Deacon was up at dawn building a cook fire. After breakfast he, his sons and Joe Dock helped Chan move the Box A cattle up on Roaring Creek where Joe Dock was camped in an old cabin Dan Gorman had used years before. Here Chan and Joe Dock were to batch all summer. Chan's cows and calves were to be scattered among the Deacon's.

On the first Sunday, at the Deacon's invitation, Chan rode to eat dinner in the rancher's big log cabin, six miles away. Sunday was the Lord's day, the Deacon held, and on it he did no work.

"It's all fixed—about your cows staying up here," the Deacon told Chan. "I showed old man McClintock and the rest the bill of sale. They mebbe smelled a rat, but they had to admit I had a right to bring them Box A cattle up here." He brought out a folded piece of brown wrapping paper from his vest pocket and showed Chan the bill of sale he had written a few days before.

"We won't be needin' this no more," the Deacon chuckled and flung it into the fire.

Before dinner the Deacon read a chapter from the Bible and at the table he asked a long blessing for the meal. The Deacon aimed to live a righteous life, though he didn't get to church often.

* * *

IN camp Chan and Joe Dock settled to a routine of horse wrangling, cooking and riding after cattle. When there was nothing else to do they hunted

mavericks that had stayed in the mountains all winter, racing in pursuit through tangles of lodgepole pines and charred fallen trees left by forest fires and down rocky slopes.

It took nerve to race running cattle in the mountains, and it took experience to know how to do it. There was constant danger, but Chan Gorman welcomed that. And he learned fast from Joe Dock, who had spent most of his life on mountain range. In another year, Joe Dock declared, Chan wouldn't have to take off his hat to anyone as a mountain hand.

Frequently they ran into elk and deer and mountain sheep. They fished dozens of streams, hauling out native trout by the dozen. The summer slid by like lightning. Chan knew he would never leave the mountains for long. High country was in his blood. During his spare time he cut logs for the cabin he planned to build next spring on a sunny slope above Roaring Creek.

Other cattlemen in the Kit Carsons he met occasionally, Old Man McClintock among them. According to the Deacon, McClintock was a violent old cuss, but he was friendly enough to Chan. He too had known Chan Gorman's father.

Sometimes, remembering Big Brad's threat to kill him, he kept a watch out for a possible ambusher. He guessed Big Brad wouldn't come up personally to bushwhack him; he'd send up the old gunman, Tiger Leish, to do it. That danger, however, did not worry him. He could look after himself all right, and his cattle too.

Joe Dock took down a pack train to the county seat for supplies, leaving Chan alone. On the day that he expected Dock back, Chan rode in late, turned his horse into the pasture and jingled his spurs toward the house to make supper on the open fireplace where they prepared their meals.

Entering the back door, he sniffed suddenly. Something foreign to the mountain smells was in the still air of the dark closed cabin. Either someone was in the room or had been there very recently.

He shut the door and slid his six-shooter from its holster, crouching in the darkness. If a man were in the room Chan guessed suddenly that he would be hidden in one of the lodgepole bunks across from the fireplace, waiting to shoot Chan as the rancher built a fire to cook supper.

A stool, he knew, was close beside him. He groped about until he found a leg. Then picking up the stool, he threw it across the room, meanwhile moving swiftly to the side in the darkness.

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THERE was a spurt of orange flame and a crash of a gun from the lower lodgepole bunk across the room. The slug went into the wall a few feet away. Then Chan triggered his gun swiftly, emptying his gun at the bunk.

"Don't shoot no more, Chan; you got me," called a voice he identified instantly as Tiger Leish's. It could be a trick, but when Chan heard the clatter of a gun on the floor he knew he had hit the man.

He lighted a candle and saw Tiger, lying crumpled in the lower bunk, blood soaking his shirt.

"I'm done for," gasped Leish as Chan bent over him. "I orter knowed more than to give you any chance a-tall. Ort to of got yuh from the brush."

"Who sent you here?"

"You know who sent me. Big Brad went plumb hog-crazy when Lida turned him down this summer on marryin' him. He guessed she was waiting for you to come back. And he'll kill you 'fore he's done. Big Brad is never goin' to let yuh keep them Box A cows or marry that Powers girl."

Tiger Leish's breath came fast and he closed his eyes wearily. "I'm done for," he muttered in a rasping whisper. "But how'd you guess I was in here?"

"Smelled you," said Chan bluntly. "You can't work around the stables and pitch hay in Sunk Lakes Valley without gettin' a sweat smell that don't come to men here in the mountains."

"Smelled me!" gasped Tiger Leish. "The pitchfork smell, hey!" Then Tiger Leish cursed in a mumbling monotone, until suddenly his voice abruptly faded and his lank body stiffened.

Chan considered his situation. He had no witness to back his word that he had shot in self-defense. The law might believe his story, but it might not. Big Brad

Bayliss would say that Tiger had gone up only to pay a friendly visit. More than the trouble he might get into was the stark fact that he had killed a man.

Tiger had been ornary, mean, treacherous, but in Sunk Lakes Chan would be looked on as a murderer. No matter how justified he had been in shooting the bush-whacker, Lida Powers might believe him a murderer too. He was in a bad jam and he was worried.

There came the clatter of hoofs. He stiffened and slipped out of the door. Joe Dock's yell came, hazing his pack string along up the final climb.

"Heard a few shots a while back," Dock said as he swung down. "That family of skunks been tryin' to camp under our shack again?"

"Two-legged skunk this time," said Chan, and told what had happened.

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JOE DOCK went indoors to look down at the dead man soberly. "Laid for you, did he? He got what was coming to him, but the law might not believe it, kid. It would just be your word against Bayliss' and his friends. At best it would make you a lot of trouble. It would give Bayliss a chance to get you a few years in prison."

"It's going to rain tonight and wash out the tracks of the horse he rode up here. If it was me, I'd find his horse and turn it loose down the mountain, and I'd bury this hombre where his grave won't show. Later on, when things break good, maybe you can clear it up all right."

"I don't like to hide a body," Chan said. "I'd like to come clean with the law."

"Listen," said Joe Dock. "I lived a few more years than you. I like to keep inside the law too, but the law don't always mean justice. Not when you got a enemy like that Bayliss."

Chan allowed himself to be persuaded, and they put Tiger Leish's body on a horse and took it a mile from the cabin to dig a grave alongside a rocky wash. It was raining hard by then. When the wash flooded, it would cover sand over the stones they piled over Leish's body.

Tiger's horse, tied near the cabin, they

turned loose. The animal would hit back for Sunk Lakes where he had been foaled; horses always did that.

Chan knew that Joe Dock would keep his mouth shut, but the killing was still there—a black blot that would have to be cleared up legally some time. . . .

A few weeks later Joe Dock quit working for the Deacon; he had received by mail the offer of a foreman's job at big wages down on an Arizona ranch. He packed his warbag and rode away with a casual "S'long" and a "Watch your step, kid. If the sky ever blacks up for you, call on me."

Left alone in the cabin where he had killed Tiger Leish, Chan Gorman became a little jumpy. Fall was bringing fogs to the mountains, days when the clouds hung thick over the peaks. The nights were getting bitter cold and ice formed on the pools.

When Deacon Colter came over to see why Chan did not come to Sunday dinner, he found a changed Chan Gorman, a cowboy who was a lot older than the young fellow who had hazed his Box A cattle up Gorman Canyon.

Perhaps it was because, in the thick mists and fogs that clung to the high peaks, Chan had been seeing the ghosts of men that had been killed in the Carsons, including that of Tiger Leish. Seeing the ghosts of dead men piles the years on a man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bloody Trail

LATE September often brought deep snows and howling blizzards in the Kit Carsons. Fall showed up early this year and round-up was on—long days of hazing cattle out of canyons and off of high mesas where the wilder animals hid out as if they were part mountain goat.

One of old man McClintock's cowboys and his horse were pulled off a cliff by a bronco bull and killed. The cowboy's funeral sermon was preached by the Deacon and attended by all the riders on the north side of the peaks. It was bad to see a cowboy killed in his prime, but those things happened in the Kit Carsons. After the burial, instead of being more cautious, the cowboys rode the slopes even more recklessly.

After round-up the cattle were to be moved down on the desert winter range. There had been little rain on the desert that summer, and winter feed prospects were poor.

With an early winter coming on, Chan Gorman thought often of the huge stacks of hay in Sunk Lakes Valley. It would do the mountain cattle a lot of good to have a chance at that feed. Calves needed hay to keep growing. The Sunk Lake colonists had been unable to use or sell a third of the hay they put up each year. Some of the stacks below Sunk Lakes reservoir were ten years old. The farmers in the Colony didn't have the cattle to feed it out, and the only purchasers for the hay were the cattlemen who bought it at low prices when their winter range on the desert ran short.

The mountain cattlemen, however, laughed at the idea of feeding. Why buy hay when the desert provided free range? And if they lost a few cattle from starvation, what of that? If too many cattle died they would buy a few stacks of hay in the spring.

Pushed by a cold wind and with a snow coating the pines and spruces white, they moved down Gorman Canyon with the Deacon's cattle and Chan's and made camp in the foothills. Another day's drive would take them out on to the desert.

There were six hands at the Deacon's camp, and this being officially the end of the summer's work, half of the hands would be paid off. It didn't take much riding to watch cattle on the desert. The men who were turned loose would have to ride grubline during the winter or hole up in stable jobs in town.

As they finished eating breakfast, the Deacon came over to put his hand on Chan's shoulder.

"I'll have to let you go," he said. "You know how it is, son. I'd like to keep you on, but we don't need many men to ride after cattle down on the desert."

Chan, startled, stared at the Deacon, whose face wore a sympathetic grin. Then he noticed that the Deacon's sons, Asa and Zachary, had drifted over and were standing a little back of their father with their right hands close to their six-shoot-

ers. The Deacon's cook, hard-faced Jim Bird, was pretending to fool with his rifle. The three were watching him closely.

CHAN had laid aside his gun belt and holstered weapon to put on his chaps. The belt lay on the ground ten feet away.

"What you trying to do, Deacon?" he asked, recovering slowly from his surprise. "Joking? I haven't been working for you this summer. I've been looking after my own Box A cattle."

Asa and Zachary laughed at that, and the Deacon joined in with a tolerant chuckle. "Looking after those Box A cows you sold me, you mean? Guess you forgot you gave me a bill of sale for 'em. Business is business, boy. You sure ain't forgot the deal we made?"

Chan saw that the Deacon was in earnest. He had signed a bill of sale which the Deacon had written out on a piece of brown paper. Maybe he had been a fool to sign it, but he had been under age, and a minor couldn't sign a legal bill of sale for cattle. And the paper had been burned. Or had it been burned? Had the Deacon substituted another piece of paper with his writing on it, making Chan believe the bill of sale had been destroyed?

"You aren't trying to crook me out of those cattle, are you, Deacon?" he asked quietly. "You know I signed that paper at your advice. So I could keep my cattle on the mountain. You never paid me a cent for those Box A's. And I signed that bill of sale before I was of age."

"You're wrong; it was signed after your twenty-first birthday," returned the Deacon. "The date on it is September third, and I recorded it last week in the county seat. And it was signed all proper before witnesses. Those Box A cattle belong to me. I paid you a good price for them, as my sons will testify, and if you lost the money in some poker game, that's your hard luck."

"You're a damn' liar, Deacon," said Chan, with rage burning more and more hotly in him at the bald-faced attempt to steal his herd. "You know damn' well I wasn't of age when I signed it, and you know damn' well you didn't pay me a cent!"

The cook, Jim Bird, pretended to test the mechanism of the weapon, working the lever. Asa and Zachary had their hands on their six-shooter butts.

Chan flung his fist straight at the Deacon. It landed in the middle of the Deacon's whiskers. As the Deacon stumbled back, Chan caught him by the throat, shaking him as a dog does a rat. He had forgotten the others. They did not fire but from behind him a six-shooter barrel came down on Chan's shoulder and glanced along his head.

Chan's knees buckled and he crumpled to the ground. He rolled to get away from Asa and Zachary, hoping to get to his feet again, but the cook came in, the clutched rifle raised. When it descended, a fog dropped down for Chan.

"Don't shoot him," Chan dimly heard Deacon Colter order as a boot heel thudded into his ribs. "After all, he's kin o' mine, and if he was killed out here, it'd be sorta hard to explain to the sheriff. Just work him over."

Asa, Zachary and the cook did a good job of it. Boots thudded into his ribs, his face and his arms that he instinctively put up to protect his head. They left his body a battered, throbbing mass of flesh and bones. Yet, lanced with pain until he was all but senseless, he was still glaring up at Deacon Colter when they quit.

The Deacon stooped over him. "You'd of killed me if you could," he accused Chan. "I don't hold with vi'lence—but if you ever come around my camp, we'll shoot you down like you was a rabied wolf."

They took the herd on, leaving Chan and his horses in the abandoned camp. He passed out after they had gone and when he came to in the afternoon, he was half frozen. He couldn't make it into a saddle that day and he barely managed to keep a fire going. His six-shooter and rifle were gone.

THE second day, weak and groggy, he was able to saddle his horse. It was snowing a little and turning cold. It was the start of a long cold win-

ter and he was just a penniless cowpuncher, gypped out of the stake he had earned in Sunk Lakes Valley. They said that youngsters who had a ranch or cattle handed to them always lost them in a year or two. He had worked hard and plenty for those Box A cows, however, and yet he had been flimflammed out of them.

He thought of Lafe Peabody and old Caleb Powers and wished for their advice. But he shook his head at thought of riding to ask it. He wasn't going back to Sunk Lakes Valley for anything except a girl he loved. And most of all, he wasn't going back for Lida Powers until he had a decent home and a decent life to offer her.

It was a bitter pill to swallow. For years he had looked up to the men who ranged their herds in the Kit Carsons as heroes and had dreamed of the day when he would ride with them. Now he realized that they were like other men—a mixture of good and bad. Some, like Joe Dock, were the salt of the earth; others, like Deacon Colter, assayed pure hundred percent polecat.

When he forced his tortured body into the saddle, he was gritting his teeth in his anger. He'd go gunning for the Deacon, he told himself, but farther along the trail he cooled off. If Deacon Colter had a bill of sale for those cattle dated after Chan Gorman's twenty-first birthday, why then the Deacon was the legal owner of the herd. And if he killed the Deacon, he'd be hanged for it.

Riding to the county seat, he called on Lawyer John Taylor, who attended to legal work for the Sunk Lakes Colony.

"They're my cattle," Chan ended his story. "And I'm getting them back, one way or another. Deacon Colter stole 'em from me, same as a cattle rustler that ran them off!"

"I know what you're thinking," said the lawyer. "That you've got a right to kill Deacon Colter like you'd kill any cattle thief. But this time the Deacon's got the law with him. Your cattle were stolen, but you signed away your title to them, and how can you prove you didn't? You'd have to admit in court that the bill of sale bears your signature. The date Deacon Colter put in later reads after your twenty-first birthday. His sons were witnesses and they'll swear you signed it after you were twenty-one. I could start suit, but you haven't got a leg to stand on."

"There was another witness, Joe Dock," Chan reminded the attorney. He would know when it was really signed, which was the first night he saw me in early summer."

"Joe Dock has a good reputation. If he'll come in here and testify for you, we can claim fraud. Where is he?"

"He left for Arizona a few weeks ago. Got the offer of a foreman job on a ranch near Tucson. And I begin to smell a rat about that job. It's my guess the Deacon had some pals of his offer Joe that job to get him out of the country."

The lawyer grunted. "Maybe. Anyhow, I can't do anything until you get him here. If you don't find him, you're licked."

Chan Gorman's mouth tightened. "I'll never be licked," he declared.

The lawyer shook his head. Chan Gorman was young; he'd learn that everybody got licked some time—a lot of times.

The trail to Arizona was a long one and he needed money to travel it. He sold two of his horses and bought a little grub, a six-shooter and rifle and plenty of cartridges. But finding Joe Dock was not easy.

Reaching Arizona, he learned that Dock had left his job and had gone to work for a neighboring outfit during roundup. After that, he had drifted north to a ranch on Black Mesa where he had disappeared. After two weeks of patient hunting Chan picked up the trail in a town where Dock had hired out as guide for some oil geologists. They had, he learned, gone over into the Whispering Butte country.

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HIS money was gone by then and the boots that he had inherited from his father needed soling. He considered putting them away until he was able to fill them, but grimly he shook his head. He was filling them now or never. He got a few days' work and with the money, managed to get on Joe Dock's trail again. Dock was heading north, maybe back to the Sunk Lakes country, like

a horse heading for his home range.

He hurried his pace at that, trading his gaunted-down saddle horse for a bronc that had the strength and endurance to cover a trail fast. It might not be healthy for Joe Dock in Deacon Colter's country. For the Deacon knew that Joe, as a witness to the crooked bill of sale, could wreck his steal of the Box A cattle.

When he hit the end of the desert under the Kit Carson range, he found the toughest winter the section had ever seen. Thin, starved cattle were wandering about, bawling mournfully as they grazed on tufts of dead grass and weeds that stuck above the hard crust of foot-deep snow. Now and then there was the frozen carcass of a dead animal. The cattle weren't in shape to starve through the months until spring. Even the few of his Box A's which he saw, while in better condition than the mountain cattle, were thin, ribby skeletons.

Again he thought of the big haystacks in Sunk Lakes Valley. The cattlemen from the Kit Carsons were fools to let their stock starve when there was cheap hay nearby. . . .

The county seat was the best place to inquire about Joe Dock, and heading toward it, he dropped in at a camp shack intending to help himself to a little grub. He dismounted to kick open the door. As he entered a shot sailed by his head, and Chan jumped back out of range.

"Come in and take what's comin' to you, you bushwackin' sons! croaked Joe Dock's voice.

Chan's heart leaped. Listen, Joe—it's Gorman," he called. "Chan Gorman."

"Come on in, kid," said Joe Dock hoarsely.

Joe Dock lay in a bunk, a week's growth of beard on his face, a blood-soaked bandage about his head, another about his leg, his eyes feverish.

"Water," he croaked. And when Chan hurried it from the spring, Dock gulped loudly.

"They left me for dead," he explained hoarsely. "That damn' cook of the Deacon's, Jim Bird; and Asa and Zachary. Shot me off my horse two miles from here. I crawled to this shack, but I ain't had a bite of grub since. And on top of that I a'most bled and froze to death. What the hell got into the Colters? Seemed surprised to know I was back from Arizona and after talkin' friendly a while, they shot me as I started ridin' off. What got into 'em?"

"They figured you'd make 'em trouble," explained Chan. "I wanted you to testify for me on a case. You remember that bill of sale I gave the Deacon in early summer? He fixed the date, making it look like I'd signed it after I was of age and then he took my cattle. I went to Arizona to hunt you."

"There was something fishy about that job I was offered down there," said Dock. "The owner of the outfit wanted me to go into rustling with him, and I figured out he was tryin' to frame me into a sentence in the pen. That's why I got out."

"Likely the Deacon told him to fix it so you couldn't show up back here and testify for me," said Chan.

Swiftly Chan built a fire, and while a meal was cooking he washed the blood and filth from Dock. Dock had to be hurried to a doctor. The grub put new life into Joe, and they started out next morning, Dock in the saddle and Chan afoot leading their one horse.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hay and Hot Lead

BY THE time they reached the county seat Joe Dock announced that he was strong enough to walk into the doctor's office. Inside, the doctor looked over Joe Dock and shook his head wonderingly. "You must be half mule to have missed infection in those bullet punctures. Go to bed for a month and maybe you'll get well. But it won't be because of anything I can do at this late date."

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"That's fine," said Joe Dock, and insisted on hobbling straight over to Lawyer Taylor's office. The lawyer called in his stenographer to write out Joe Dock's statement that the bill of sale for the Box A cattle, signed by Chan Gorman, had been signed in early summer. And that he, Joe Dock, couldn't have witnessed Gorman's signing it after Chan was twenty-one, because by then Dock was in Arizona.

"There's something else I've been thinking about since you were in last," said the lawyer to Chan Gorman. "You know the Clay Thompson farm in Sunk Lakes Valley?"

"Ought to. Clay Thompson was my grandfather. I put up hay on it ever since I could drive a team of old mules to a hand dump rake. Big Brad Bayliss, Thompson's son-in-law, has got it now."

"He hasn't got it in the eyes of the law. When Thompson died years back, he left a will giving that farm to his two daughters—your mother and Big Brad Bayliss' wife. You were entitled to half of the place through your mother, and according to Thompson's will the other half was left only to Big Brad's wife or to her children. She died childless. Which makes the whole Thompson farm yours. Did you know that?"

Chan shook his head. "And if I had known it, I wouldn't want any part of that farm. Or any other farm." Then he thought of the Box A cattle wandering over the desert, slowly starving to death. "Whoa! If that farm did belong to me, I'd be entitled to hay off it as rent?"

"You would," admitted the lawyer. "And hay for years back. You've got an air-tight case against Big Brad."

Chan grinned. "That's good. My Box A cows are going to do nothing this winter but stand around and eat hay."

"You haven't got 'em back yet," said the lawyer.

"I'm starting to get 'em back tomorrow. I'm gatherin' my cattle and taking 'em back to Sunk Lakes Valley so they can stuff themselves with hay. You start suit against both Deacon Colter and Big Brad. But there's something I can't figure out. When I left, Lafe Peabody and Caleb Powers said nary a word to me about my owning that Thompson farm. Maybe they figured the debt was paid when they gave me those cattle. I'd have let it go at that then. But I'm different now; I'm getting every cent coming to me."

The lawyer grinned. "Damned if I don't think you'll get it, too!" he remarked. "I'd about as soon try to take something from you as grab a hunk o' beef from a starving Bengal tiger."

Chan nodded toward Joe Dock. "Got to grab all I can," he said. "I got a bullet-punctured partner to look out for now."

Dock grinned as they got outside. "You talk tough and you are tough, Chan, but you're not tough enough to take on two bunches of badmen single-handed. Both the Deacon and Big Brad will be gunnin' for you when you grab those Box A's and herd 'em toward Big Brad's haystacks."

"Don't let that worry you," Gorman told him. "You go to bed and stay there a month like the doctor told you."

Dock snorted. "What cowboy ever got well stayin' in bed? Besides we ain't going to live long anyhow—slappin' Deacon Colter in the face. And I'm helpin'—I got a bone to pick with the Deacon's bunch."

Joe Dock borrowed a couple of horses, and packing one with a bedroll, a little chuck and grain, the two rode back to the desert.

* * *

THEY found another storm threatening to sweep down over it. They saw also that the desert ranchers were making a general round-up of their starved stock. For miles over the desert long strings of cattle were moving obliquely to the bitter wind, heading for the Sunk Lakes Valley and its stacks of hay. Many of the animals were too weak to buck the storm and had to be left behind.

"Saves us the bother of gatherin' your Box A's," said Joe Dock. "The Deacon's doing the work for you. It's goin' to be a shock to him when he finds out about that lawsuit you sicked on him to get 'em back."

In late afternoon they ran into one old rancher, Chris Poor, from the south side of the Kit Carsons, hazing along a string of cattle. Poor knew Dock and Chan only as cowboys he had met in the mountains.

"Want a job?" he asked them. "Go and hire out to old man McClintock. He's hirin' men—men with guns."

"Why the guns?" asked Gorman.

"To help us cowmen go into Sunk Lakes Valley tonight and take that bunch of farmers apart. Here we been buyin' their hay every year, and now when we're in a bad jam with our cattle dyin', they jacked up the price on us. They're askin' twenty dollars a ton in the stack or sign over half the cattle we take in to feed. That'll give 'em half our herds for a few tons of hay. We're goin' in there to jist take that hay. Deacon Colter is the only one ag'in usin' force, and he says he's even tempted a little to forgit that he's a man that don't hold for violence."

"Who told you cowmen the price was raised this year?" asked Chan. He had known Caleb Powers and the other colonists all his life. They were not folks to take advantage of the ranchers' misfortune. They had always taken a price much less than hay really was worth.

"Big Brad Bayliss told us," said the rancher. "He rode in to Deacon's camp where the Deacon had called a meeting of the cowmen, aimin' for us to make a deal to buy all the Sunk Lakes hay. Big Brad told us the prices we'd have to pay and said we could either take it or leave it. So we're takin' the hay instead. You boys want to hire out to help git hay for our starvin' cows?"

"We'll think it over," said Gorman, and after traveling on with Poor for a few miles, they dropped off to camp in a creek bottom where Chan made a sheep-camp shelter for Joe Dock.

Gorman couldn't blame the cattlemen for trying to take hay that had been jacked up in price until no cattlemen could touch it with a ten-foot pole. No man was going to let his cattle starve if he could help it. Events were moving swiftly toward a gun battle that night, The mountain ranchers against the Sunk Lakes farmers.

"I can't believe Powers and the rest would take advantage of the ranchers," Chan frowned at Dock. "The outfits are all makin' camp below the north side of the Colony. I'm ridin' into their camp to see what's behind all this. There's a strong smell of polecat under the house!"

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LEAVING Joe Dock in camp to rest, he headed down to join the cattlemen. Half a dozen chuck wagons were drawn up under the lee of a wooded hill, with the round-up herd held a half-mile away.

As dusk came, Chan fell in with a string of thin cattle shambling along toward the big herd and rode into one of the camps. His mackinaw collar up above his unshaven face, he figured he might go unidentified even by one of the Deacon Colter outfit. No one would suspect an outsider of coming in with the riders following one of the strings of cattle.

Men, cursing the cold, stomped about the various camp fires, and the busy cooks shoved them profanely away from the kettles and Dutch ovens. From the men came steadily growled curses directed at the Sunk Lake colonists.

The sky was clearing as night came down but the wind was still sending puffs of snow over the frozen surface.

Chan edged into one group after the other, saying nothing, listening hard. It was all planned; they were moving that night into the valley. Old Man McClintock moved about, talked violently against the farmers, fanning the fire of anger burning in the men.

After McClintock came Deacon Colter, arguing as heatedly for peace.

"I'm ag'in vi'lence," stated the Deacon. "We're goin' ag'in the law in attackin' them folks. 'Sides, there'll be a lot of you men hurt. Them farmers could see today that we're headin' our cattle for their valley, and those hayhands got plenty guns and know how to use 'em. I say wait."

"While our cows starve?" growled McClintock. "Listen to 'em bawlin' for feed. And we won't have to do much fightin'. I got good news for all of yuh. There's a bunch of cowmen coming down on the Colony from the back, by way of the trail over Battle Mountain. Same bunch of cattlemen we once brung in to help get rid of sheepmen up in the Kit Carsons, from the Gran Quivira."

"When they goin' to be here?"

"Early tonight. Dependin' on how fast they can travel. After supper we'll move up to the edge of the Colony and start

pepperin' away at those hayhands. Then when these friends of ours come in from the back to jump 'em, it'll all be over."

Chan savvied the talk about a bunch of outside cattlemen coming in to attack the colonists from the rear. It was an old dodge to have a bunch ride in from another community, sometimes as much as a hundred miles away, to do the dirty work of killing sheep or herders while the local ranchers stayed in town, providing themselves with alibis.

Tonight, however, the local and outside bunches were both joining in a fight to overwhelm the Sunk Lakes farmers; shoot a lot of them down, burn their barns and maybe their houses, wrecking all that the Colony had done in years of hard work. It would be cold-blooded murder.

It meant, Chan Gorman realized, the end of the Sunk Lakes Colony. They had a payment to make in the spring on the dam, and they couldn't make it unless they sold their hay. If many of the farmers were killed and crippled, they'd be sure to lose their land.

Pushing closer to hear more, Chan suddenly came face to face with Deacon Colter. For a moment the Deacon stared puzzled; then he ripped out an oath.

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CHAN had drawn his six-shooter so swiftly that the Deacon was caught flat-footed. Gorman could have shot Colter at that moment, but he was no cold-blooded killer. He slugged the Deacon over the head with the gun-barrel, and turned to hot-foot it for his horse, tied on the other side of the chuck wagon.

"Spy!" bawled the Deacon as his legs collapsed. "Cut him down! Don't let him git away!"

Chan mounted with six-shooters bellowing an angry chorus behind him; no one had time to get to a rifle.

In the saddle he spurred into a thick cloud of snow raised by a gust of wind and dropped into a wash to ride along it. Shots were cutting the air over him and one scraped along his head with the force of a club.

He sagged in the saddle, grabbing the horn hard with both hands to keep his seat. As he straightened up and spurred hard, another bullet tore a jagged gash in his left arm. The wash became a steep-walled ravine and pounding along it for half a mile, he turned up a little wooded hill.

From the hill he headed back to the camp where he had left Joe Dock. He figured that pursuers would be riding to cut him off from the Sunk Lakes Colony, thinking he was riding to warn his farmer friends. Reaching camp, he slid from the saddle, and Joe Dock poured him a tin cup of hot coffee.

Chan Gorman didn't know how bad his head was hurt; maybe it was just a scraped skull. Blood was running down his arm, but he could still use it.

"You're the one needin' to be took to a medico now," said Dock.

"Got no time for a doctor," Chan said. "Got to get to the Colony. They're expecting an attack from these desert ranchers, but there's another big outfit comin' over Battle Mountain to jump 'em from the back. We'd better head for the Powers house."

There was no doubt in his mind as to where his sympathies lay. Maybe Powers and Lafe Peabody had planned to let Big Brad have the farm Chan had inherited. It didn't matter.

The people of the Colony were still his people, and they needed his help. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Deadly Remedy for Deadly Men

TWICE during the ride through the wind-driven snow, Joe Dock who could have done with a little help himself, had to catch Chan to keep him from falling from his saddle. Chan's head was clear however when he and Dock galloped into the Powers farm yard. As they drew up in front of the kitchen door and dismounted, Lida appeared.

"You!" she exclaimed, recognizing Chan, and drew him into the kitchen. A low cry came from the girl as she saw the bloody arm.

"Nothing serious," he told her. "Lida, this is my partner, Joe Dock. Where's your grandfather? I've got to see him."

"He's not here. We're expecting serious trouble. The ranchers' cattle on the

desert are starving and we expected to sell them a lot of hay. But Big Brad came back from a talk with them and said they refused to buy hay this year; they're going to take it instead. And today we saw them moving toward the valley with their cattle. It means a fight. Grandfather and all the men are down at the north end of the valley keeping watch."

"Big Brad said the ranchers wouldn't buy your hay?" said Chan. "What price did you folks offer to sell it at this year?"

"The usual prices we've always asked. Five dollars a ton for alfalfa; three for slough hay."

"And Big Brad took that offer to them?"

"Yes. He volunteered to ride with one of his nephews, Ira. The Colony even offered to sell the hay on time—until spring when our payment on the dam is due. But Big Brad told us they wouldn't listen to him; they said they were just going to take what hay they needed."

"Big Brad lied!" exclaimed Chan. "And there isn't time to get it straightened out now. There's a big bunch of riders coming down the trail over Battle Mountain to jump the colonists from the back while they battle the ranchers. We came—"

She gestured sharply for silence and all three tensed, listening. From the north end of the Colony land came the distant boom of guns and rifles, traveling far in the still cold air.

"The ruckus has already begun," said Joe Dock. "McClintock and the rest moved up to the Colony."

Chan nodded. "And the riders from the Gran Quivira country are due soon. There's no time to get your grandfather and the rest to stop them. I've been thinking over a scheme to send those Quivira riders back. Lida, you know where Caleb keeps the key to the powder house by the lake? Get it and bring it to the stable. Joe and I will be down there saddling a pair of pack mules."

When she brought them the key, Lida Powers was dressed for riding in mackinaw and goat-hair chaps.

"I'm going with you," she decided. "Both of you men have been hurt. You may need me. My pony's in the barn."

There was no turning her back, and so the three set out with the two mules with empty pack saddles, heading for the Sunk Lakes reservoir at the foot of Battle Mountain.

* * *

THE little rock building used to store explosive sat on the west bank of the irrigation reservoir a few yards from the dam. The past spring the colonists had blasted a canal through solid rock to bring water to a tract of land east of Battle Mountain. Gorman who had worked with the gang, knew that several boxes of blasting powder had been left unused.

Using the key, they flung open the stout cedar-plank door. There were three full boxes of blasting powder and another one of sticks. Lida had to help the two crippled men pack the boxes on the two mules, and they went on, riding fast.

Past the lake, they swung into a narrow canyon along which ran the trail that climbed to the pass over Battle Mountain. Down this canyon the Gran Quivira war-

riors would ride to make their surprise attack on the Colony.

Joe Dock looked up curiously at the towering walls as Chan Gorman led the way. It was the first time Dock had ever seen Rotten Rock Canyon, eroded in a deep trench from conglomerate—clay studded with rocks like raisins in a pudding and compressed to concrete hardness by geological shiftings. Many a rider had suffered shivers in riding through that canyon, wondering if one of the dangerously-balanced pinnacles and slabs above might take a treacherous notion just then to crash down on him.

At a place where the canyon bottom narrowed to a few yards in width, under a great flatiron of rock teetering on a narrow base undermined by flood water, Gorman pulled up. He unloaded Joe Dock and two boxes of the explosive, instructing Dock to plant the powder under the flatiron-shaped cliff. The explosion, Chan figured, would thrown down enough rock to block the canyon trail against Gran Quivira men.

Joe Dock in his checkered life had worked at mining, and handling sticks of blasting powder was an old story to him. Expertly he went to work, while Chan and Lida Powers rode a half-mile farther up canyon. There, to make the stopping of the riders sure, Chan intended to place the remainder of the explosive.

Lida took their horses back after the packs were unloaded, volunteering to climb up a trail leading to the canyon rim, riding along it until she reached a point from which she could watch for the appearance of the riders. When they came, she was to signal to Chan and Dock by rolling a boulder into the canyon bottom.

Chan had finished tamping in his last charge and was rolling a cigarette when up canyon he heard the clatter of a rolling boulder bouncing from bench to bench, landing finally with a loud boom in the canyon bottom. Joe Dock struck a match below to indicate that he also had heard the signal, and they settled to wait.

Soon the thud of hoofs sounded up canyon and grew steadily louder. Then, in the light reflected off the snowy ground from the clear starlit sky, a group of riders coming in double file approached. Chan thought that the procession of men moving at a jog trot would never end. He counted nearly fifty as they passed.

Joe Dock was to have first chance at them, after which Chan Gorman's scattered charges were to complete the job. Dock waited coolly until the lead riders were a hundred yards away and lighted a dangerously short fuse. Then he hobbled on down the canyon as fast as his condition would let him. Reaching the crevice in the cliff, he dived into it an instant before the roar of blasting powder mush-roomed up out of the canyon with deafening force. Magnified by the rock walls, the sound effect was as if that part of the world had been split asunder by a monster volcano.

◆ ◆ ◆

FOLLOWING the first explosion which sent hundreds of rock fragments flying like small meteors in all directions, the startled riders could see in the faint light the great slab of rock overhanging the canyon ahead of them toppling. To them it must have seemed as if the whole canyon wall was collapsing. The huge side of cliff fell with the crash of a salvo of artillery. Following it came the rumbling thunder of thousands of tons of rock sliding into the gap.

The cavalcade as one man began a wild flight, turning tail to spur desperately out of the zone of sliding rock. The fallen cliff alone would have been enough to block the passage of the riders, but Chan had planned not only to turn them but to send them home.

Touching a match to his first fuse, he ran along a shelf to the next. His first explosion boomed just as he lighted the last fuse, and started another clattering roar of sliding rock behind the tail end of the fleeing riders. Boulders bounced on the canyon floor like tennis balls and the rumble of the descending slides mounted.

Before these new threats, the flight of the riders to get back up the canyon became a panic-stricken race for safety. Rocks sailing with the force of bullets whistled over their heads. A horse was hit and bowled over by a fragment, the rider clambering up behind the saddle of a companion.

As Chan had anticipated, the explosions

were starting a dozen other moving slides. Streams of loose rubble and boulders slid like waterfalls over small cliffs and ledges into the canyon bottom. Blinding dust clouds filled the air. Even after Chan had climbed to the rim to join Lida, the rumble of rock masses continued.

Lida, frightened by all the tumult, seized Chan's arm.

"None of 'em hurt," Chan assured her. "And if they were, they had it coming to them. This is going to throw enough scare into those fellows to send 'em high-tailin' for home."

Working their way through thick dust that obscured the stars, they reached the canyon bottom. There they found Joe Dock waiting with the horses and pack mules. The tumult up canyon continued with slides touched off by neighboring slides that still went crashing down the slopes with all the ground-shaking force of small earthquakes.

Mounted again, they rode past the reservoir and down into the valley. Across the snowy fields, they could hear the faint reports of guns. Evidently the battle between the ranchers and colonists had settled to a steady affair.

Chan Gorman pulled up. "Down there will be no place for you," he told Lida Powers. "You ride on home. I'll be back before long—we'll all be back. That battle has got to be stopped. The real trouble isn't between ranchers and farmers; it was started by a few men, for their own ends. Big Brad was one of them, but he wasn't alone in it. I'm looking forward to seeing Brad again."

"Big Brad will kill you if he has the chance," she warned him. "Look out for him, Chan."

Chan smiled grimly. "Killing's a game two can play at," he said shortly.

He and Dock rode across the valley, racing their horses along the narrow farm roads. Over the leveled fields the snow was still pushed along before the brisk, biting wind.

Approaching the north end of the valley, the explosions of the guns mounted to a rolling thunder. The cattlemen had moved up to a trail where two rocky hills, like huge portals a hundred yards apart, spread out across a hay flat.

Facing them and in front of a clump of haystacks, the farmers had made a defense line along an irrigation ditch. Inside a little cook shack they had built a fire to provide hot food and coffee.

As they rode toward the stacks, a rifleman stepped out. "Hold up!" he yelled and covered the two. "Who is it?"

"That you, Lafe?" called Chan, and rode forward at once.

• • •

LAFE all but pulled Chan from the saddle in his joy at seeing him again. "Where you been all winter, son?" he asked as he shook hands, "without sendin' us any word? We heard you lost your cattle to Deacon Colter, but you don't have to worry. There's room down here in the valley for you. You're the owner of the Thompson farm. We could of told you that before you left, but Caleb Powers and me figured we'd give you a chance to try your luck in the mountains first. We hoped you'd come back to us."

Chan stared at Lafe, dumbfounded. When he had ridden up to Rotten Rock Canyon to help the colonists, Chan had thought that they had not told him of his heritage to keep him from making a claim to it. But they had intended only to save him from the loss of all his property, knowing that a young fellow through inexperience could be easily taken in and robbed.

"You know what that noise was up near the lake?" asked Lafe. "Sounded like a earthquake."

"Big bunch of the rancher's friends riding in to jump you from the back. Joe Dock here and I turned 'em back by throwing down a few canyon walls. Lafe, Big Brad cooked up a deal to wreck you. He told the cattlemen that you wanted twenty dollars a ton for your hay, or half their cattle, to feed 'em through the winter."

"Brad told 'em that!" exclaimed Lafe. "Damn him! When he realized we weren't going to let him keep the Thompson farm as he expected, he went crazy mad and wanted to shoot Caleb Powers. He said for a while that he was leaving the Colony, but when we told him to go ahead, he quieted down. It's reasonable to sup-

pose he begun thinkin' of ways to git even with us. And this was his revenge; gittin' us into a scrap with the ranchers!"

"It goes deeper than that,I think," said Chan as they left their horses and walked to the shack. The flames from the cook fire within lighted up a little spot outside the door.

A few of the colonists had come up to get coffee—old Caleb Powers and the Walworth brothers among them. All carried rifles in the crooks of their arms. Looking at them, Chan Gorman felt a warm rush of affection. "Hayhands," he had called them contemptuously. But they were more than just hayhands; they were men—fighting men, better men than the ranchers who were making a treacherous attack on them. Men who had toiled to reclaim land from the desert and were willing to fight for it.

Chan was glad to be counted in with them. Men were men, no matter what they did for a living. The best cowboys came from farms, from boys who had grown up with horses and cattle. The big ranchers had all been farmers in their boyhood. Texas trail drivers and cattlemen, almost without exception, had come from plantations and farming families of neighboring Southern states. Kit Carson, who had become the most famous mountain man and one of the greatest Indian fighters in the West, had once been a Missouri farm boy.

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A FIGURE stepped from the shed door—Big Brad Bayliss. Following him was his nephew, Ira.

Brad started at sight of Chan. "Look who's here," he sneered.

"Yeah, I'm here," said Chan grimly. "In spite of your sendin' up Tiger Leish into the mountains to kill me. I'm here, and Tiger's layin' up under the rocks with a snowbank for a tombstone. And I know you sent him, because he told me so before he died."

"Tiger was lyin'," said Brad. "What the hell you want here? Why ain't you out with your rancher pals throwin' lead at us? Come in here aimin' to stab us in the back—that it?"

"Big Brad," he snapped, "what price did you quote those cattle ranchers on the colonists' hay? How much a ton?"

Big Brad, caught off guard, hesitated. "Why, I—I told 'em the same prices we'd always asked, of course. Three dollars for slough hay; five for alfalfa."

"And that's where you lie. You told 'em twenty dollars a ton. I heard that from the ranchers direct. And I'm wonderin' why. You stood to profit by it some way. But I can make a good guess. You're in cahoots with Deacon Colter to get the ranchers and colonists in a fight."

"In cahoots with the Deacon!" exclaimed Brad, and laughed. "Why, hell, the Deacon has all along been arguin' with the ranchers not to fight. Ever'body knows Deacon Colter is ag'in gun-trouble."

Chan grinned. He had trapped Big Brad. "How do you know what the Deacon's been arguin' to the ranchers?" he demanded. "That *proves* you're in cahoots with him! Brad, you're in with the ranchers, or at least Deacon Colter. I'm guessing you and your nephews were to be on the inside here to pick off your neighbors from the back."

Old Caleb Powers stepped forward. "What is all this, Brad? Did you tell the ranchers we were holding them up for hay? If you did, we'll string you up for a traitor."

"He's lyin'!" burst out Brad, but he knew no one believed him.

"I held off when I could of killed you last summer with that pitchfork," said Chan. "I'm not anxious to hold off now. Stick up your hands. I'm marchin' you out to the ranchers—and you'll tell 'em you lied!"

Big Brad hesitated. Then, "Keep back!" he ordered hoarsely. "Keep back or I'll throw lead through your guts!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bullet-Fodder for a Starving Range

AS HE faced Big Brad, with the nephew Ira Bayliss close to Brad's side, Chan Gorman had never been cooler in his life. Yet he knew that Big Brad was not going to surrender; that he would fight.

Chan had seen death in the Kit Carsons

that summer; and he'd faced it with a grin a hundred times in the saddle. Looking again at death Big Brad's still-holstered six-shooter, he was unmoved. It was said that once Big Brad and Tiger Leish had worked as hired gunmen in a cattle war. Against Big Brad's experience, Chan Gorman had only the same natural speed and coördination of muscles and nerves that he had showed in riding tricky, lightning-fast broncs.

Big Brad snarled a curse and dug for his gun. Chan started his draw at the same instant, his hand making one short, quick movement, whipping the weapon up out of its holster, thumbing back the hammer as the weapon rose to fire at the instant the barrel leveled on Brad.

The shot slapped into Big Brad Bayliss, catching the man in desperate action but with his gun still unfired. Striking him in the chest, the bullet changed Bayliss into a paralyzed hulk of bone and flesh, staring in open-mouthed astonishment at Chan.

Chan turned from Brad to swing on the nephew, Ira, whose gun had cleared its holster. Coldly Chan had intented to kill Big Brad, but now he fired at Ira's right shoulder, a disabling blow like that of a great mallet which pushed the nephew back bodily.

Meanwhile Big Brad's legs buckled under him and he slumped face down in the trampled snow. And the nephew, looking at his smashed shoulder, suddenly turned into a small boy, blubbering with fright.

Caleb Powers stepped up to him. "Tell the truth," thundered the old man. "Has Big Brad been dealing with Deacon Colter?"

The nephew nodded. "Him and the Deacon," he admitted reluctantly, "rigged it up for the ranchers and farmers to fight. . . . Oh, tend my shoulder, somebody. Don't let me die out here. Take me to a doctor!"

"Talk some more first," ordered Powers. "What were Big Brad and Colter planning in here?"

The nephew, completely unnerved, babbled out a rush of words.

"Him and the Deacon figgered to git hold of both of the Sunk Lakes Valley and the Kit Carson mountain range and run 'em as partners. The Deacon was to keep clear of the fightin'. Him and Brad figgered there'd be killin's here, and the cowmen would be tried for murder and lose their cattle. While you folks would lose your farms account of bein' unable to make your payment on the dam. But tend to my shoulder," he pleaded. "Don't let me bleed to death!"

HASTILY Caleb Powers and Lafe Peabody cut away the man's jacket and shirt, binding the shoulder with strips of bandage they had brought to use as first aid.

"There's something else I'd like settled now, Ira," said Chan when they were done. "You know that Brad sent up Tiger Leish to the mountains last summer to kill me?"

"Yeah, Brad sent Tiger to kill you, all right," admitted the nephew. "But we never had any word from Tiger after he left. His saddled horse came back."

"Reason you never had word was that

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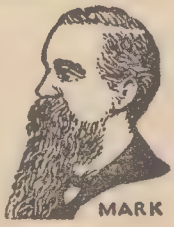

I killed him when I found him layin' for me in my cabin," said Chan. "But you're all witnesses that Leish was sent up to end me."

Lafe Peabody agreed, and then the sound of gunfire between the opposing forces broke out with renewed sharpness.

"This fight's got to be stopped!" declared Chan. "There's no sense in it. The ranchers need your hay; you need somebody to sell your hay and corn to."

"But how can we stop it?" asked Caleb Powers. "They begun the scrap."

"We got to talk to 'em," insisted Chan. "How about setting fire to that long haystack to give us a little light, while we have a palaver with these cattlemen and get the truth to 'em? If they find they've been tricked into thinking they'd have to take hay by force, they'll quite scrappin'.

"They'll believe me," continued Chan promptly. "I know most of 'em." He indicated the Brad Bayliss nephew. "They'll have to believe what he says."

"They won't give you a chance to talk," objected Powers. "The Deacon will see to that. You stay here."

"Set fire to that haystack," stated Chan.

Caleb Powers hesitated and then nodded. Lafe Peabody and two other men ran over to the nearest stack, presently sheets of flame gained headway, illuminating an increasing area of ground.

The burning of the stack astonished the attacking ranchers, making them realize that the colonists could as easily burn all their hay to keep the ranchers from taking it. The firing began to slacken.

It stopped altogether as Lafe Peabody fastened a strip of sheet brought for bandages to a long pole and waved it from behind a stack. After an interval one of the McClintock cowboys trotted out.

"We want a palaver with you," said Caleb Powers.

"Nothing doing," said the cowboy. "We ain't sendin' up no men to talk, but you can send somebody down to us."

Caleb Powers nodded. "We'll send 'em."

In silence Chan prepared to go, taking Ira, Big Brad's nephew. Joe Dock also insisted on accompanying the two. Well known to the cattlemen, Joe figured he could help make the ranchers believe Chan.

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THEY walked across the snow, Chan and Dock armed only with six-shooters. As they came close to the line of ranchers, McClintock, the old cowman Chris Poor, the Deacon, his sons and his hard-faced cook, Jim Bird appeared, with half a dozen more. The Deacon's group had taken no part in the fighting.

Deacon Colter looked at Chan and, muttering to Jim Bird who carried a carbine, he stepped menacingly forward. Seeing Chan with Ira Bayliss, the Deacon perhaps suspected what Chan intended to tell.

"I ain't listenin' to nothin' this double-crossin' Chan Gorman has go to say," the Deacon announced. "We can't believe him. He was in our camp tonight to spy."

"Listen, all of you," said Chan, raising his voice to carry to the rancher fighters remaining behind cover. "Deacon Colter was in cahoots with that Bayliss farmer who told you the price of hay had been raised. They aimed to get you and the Colony into this fight. All the farmers say the price of hay was the same as last year, but Big Brad Bayliss told you it had been raised to twenty dollars a ton."

Deacon Colter growled an interruption, but old Chris Poor turned to him. "Let him have his say out," he ordered. "If there's been a mistake, we want to hear about it. You been talkin' peace all along, Deacon, besides refusin' to join us to fight these farmers. What right you got to tell us what we'll listen to?"

Deacon Colter edged to the side and muttered a few words to his sons and Jim Bird. "I ain't havin' no one lie about me," he shouted. "Gorman's father was a cousin of mine and I looked after the boy like he was my son. But he's had it in for me ever since he sold me those Box A cattle, and then tried to renege on the deal."

"You stole those cattle from me!" returned Chan Gorman. "And I've got the proof that I signed that bill of sale before I was twenty-one. Poor, McClintock and the rest of you, listen to me: The Deacon and Brad Bayliss aimed to bust you ranchers and the farmers both, to get hold of the mountain range and the Colony farm land."

"What's your proof?" demanded Old Man McClintock.

Chan pushed Ira Bayliss ahead, who groaned as his smashed shoulder pained him. "Tell 'em, Ira," Chan ordered harshly. "Tell 'em that Big Brad and the Deacon were in cahoots to grab the Kit Carson range and the Colony land. And tell 'em that the Deacon talked peace only so he'd be in the clear with the law when the fight was over. Was that it, Ira?"

Ira Bayliss hesitated. "That's the way it was," he mumbled.

"Lies—all lies!" raged the Deacon. "Do I have to stand here while all these cussed lies is told about me? You all know me. I held out for peace even when the farmers held us up on the price of hay."

"Yes," shrilled Old Man McClintock, "but this cowboy says you done that so's you'd be in the clear with the law. Damn you, Deacon, ever'body knows you're a blasted old hypocrite. If we can git hay at a reasonable price without fighting, why fight?"

The Deacon was in tight spot, but he decided to try carrying the matter through with a high hand. "Because all this is only a trick to hold us back until the sheriff gits here!" he shouted. "From now on I'm with you men in jumpin' these crook farmers."

"Listen, all of you!" came Joe Dock's deep voice. "You've knowed me a long time. None of you ever knew me to lie. I witnessed the bill of sale the Deacon used to crook Chan out of Chan's own cattle. To keep me from telling about that, the Deacon had a fake job offered me in Arizona. Then when I drifted back here, his sons and Jim Bird shot me and left me for dead."

"Lies and more lies!" sneered the Deacon. "The story don't hold water!"

* * *

WAIT," said old Chris Poor. "I believe you Chan. I've known old Caleb Powers twenty years and he allus dealed 'em out square. The day Bayliss told us the prices, I thought it queer the colonists would try to gouge us for that hay. I say we hold back on this ruckus until we talk to Caleb."

"Chris Poor is right," said Chan. "You ranchers and the Sunk Lakes farmers have got to work together. Your cattle need hay, and the farmers are willing to raise it for you cheap. They'll either sell it or take your cattle to feed hay and corn on shares. The way it is now, you got to sell your thin steers at buyer's prices. If you work with the colonists you can get top prices for fat grain-fed cattle."

"I heard all I'm goin' to!" bellowed the Deacon. "You're here on a flag of truce, Gorman and Dock. March back to your pole-cat friends."

"So you can shoot us in the back?" retorted Chan, "like you shot Joe Dock? I'm not going until we've settled this peaceably. The rancher friends, McClintock, you sent for from the Gran Quivira to jump the Colony in the back ain't coming. We turned 'em back. If you keep on fighting here you won't get a forkful of hay, and the sheriff will be out by morning to put you under arrest. Call off the ruckus, and the hay is yours at the same price as last year."

"I say no!" rasped out Deacon Colter. "All this is a trick, dammit! We got to git our cattle into the valley and at those stacks 'fore mornin'. And look! No wonder they set fire to that stack. They've tricked us. Got riflemen laying on top of those other stacks lining up. We're in a trap!"

"No riflemen are layin' up there," said Chan. "Deacon, you're trying to throw a lot of dust in our eyes. I can prove you rigged up this fight, and I'm callin' your bets!"

"Look out," muttered Joe Dock to Chan suddenly. "The Deacon's bunch is going to dig for their irons. It's a sixgun showdown, except for Jim Bird who's goin' to use his carbine. I'll take the two on the left—the Deacon and Asa."

The Deacon, his two sons and Jim Bird had moved a little apart from the other cattlemen, to face Gorman and Dock. The distance between the two parties was not over twenty feet. Deacon Colter, his huge sons, and Jim Bird made a formidable line-up, especially against two men who were both wounded and weary with riding.

Chris Poor smelled the battle that was about to erupt. "Hold it, Deacon!" he yelled. "Hold it, I say."

But rage from his frustrated hopes shut Colter's ears. He started the fight with a sudden yell and there was the rasping slide of six-shooters from holsters, followed by the heavy explosions of the weapons.

Lighted to daylight brilliance by the burning stack, the battle was short and deadly. Side by side, Chan and Dock triggered swiftly as they faced the lead from the opposing four guns.

The pair should have had no chance whatever, which was what Deacon Colter figured. All his life, Deacon Colter had played a hypocrite's role, voicing his opposition to violence, yet there were few better shots than he and his sons.

Jim Bird, the Tiger Leish breed of old-time gunmen, was the most dangerous of the four. Swiftly he flung the lever of the carbine down to fire the rifle from his hip. He and Zachary Colter were Chan's pair, and he fired at Jim Bird first, his gun bellowing out a shot an instant before the carbine crashed.

Jim Bird went down, his face twisted with hatred, trying futilely to lever another cartridge into the chamber.

Deacon Colter and Joe Dock meanwhile had traded a single deadly round of slugs. Dock, hit in the thigh, grunted, and dropping on one knee, fired a second and a third shot at Deacon Colter. Hit hard, the Deacon was leaning far forward, his face strained, trying to raise the smoking gun in his hand before he finally fell.

Chan, with Bird disposed of, was trading shots with Zachary Colter. Zachary had been slow to get into action and when he did he wasted three wild shots before a slug from Gorman's weapon hit him in the right forearm, making him drop his six-shooter.

Joe Dock, thinking the Deacon done for, was shooting at Asa Colter, who was retreating, having no stomach for close fighting. The Deacon was not quite done for, however. Lying on the ground he was using two hands in a desperate attempt to line up his gun on Chan Gorman.

Chris Poor saw Chan's danger and yelled a warning to him. Chan turned, but too late to stop the Deacon. In the nick of time a gun bellowed from the group of cattlemen—from Old Man McClintock's long-barreled .45. The Deacon's long body jerked convulsively, legs drawing up far under him, and he lost interest in killing Chan Gorman or anyone else.

The fight ended at that. Ashen-faced, Asa Colter dropped his gun and held up his hands, yelling "I'm out of this!" Zachary, older of the two brothers, was looking down stupidly at his hand which was showing a red stream of blood running from a hole in his forearm.

Old Man McClintock spat and strode over to look down at Deacon Colter. "The damn' hypocrite!" he bawled. "Braggin' that he was ag'in violence, whilst he got us and the farmers into a bloody fight. He can explain what a God-fearin' hombre he's been when St. Peter throws him in the cut-backs, headed for hell."

Chan Gorman and Chris Poor bent to cut away Joe Dock's pants leg. They applied a tourniquet to the punctured thigh.

"We'll get a rig and hustle him in to a doctor," said Chan. "That'll make the second time in two days he's been to a doctor with lead trouble."

Lafe Peabody, Caleb Powers and half a dozen others were crossing the firelit ground.

There'd be hungry cattle moving up the next morning to feed at the stacks of hay. Chan had called the colonists fools to stack up hay that went unused year after year, but now all of those stacks would be needed to carry the big herds through until spring. Then the cattle again would take the high trails for the Kit Carsons where Chan would have a new cabin waiting for Lida.

Joe Dock grinned as they tightened the tourniquet. "Don't bother about gettin' me a rig to take me to no doc, Chan," he ordered. "Boost me into a saddle and I'll ride in. Mountain cowboys are tough."

"Partner," said Chan, "tough or not tough, you're ridin' into town on a soft mattress. You'll stay in bed for whatever time the doc tells you. And I'll see that you do, even if I got to sit by your side, holdin' your hand and tellin' you bedtime stories!"

THE END

The gun was still in Jackman's holster when it exploded. . . .

Shoot First—Live Longer!

By WILLIAM BENTON JOHNSTON

Shunned, feared and hated by both honest men and outlaws, Blake Ramsey, dead-or-alive man-hunter, was doomed to a future as lonely and bleak as his own heart . . . until, for the first and last time, he forgot his cold, grim code of "Shoot first —shoot to kill!"

DEPUTY MARSHAL BLAKE RAMSEY came out of Brandon's Hotel and walked down the street, seeing its emptiness and listening to its significant stillness. His slow glance considered the alleys and buildings of this dusty thoroughfare, each door and each window. He saw Sam Jackman, all cocked and primed and waiting there by the King's Palace; giving him the same attention that he gave other parts of the scene; no more and no less.

Blake found himself regarding this with complete detachment, fitting it into a pattern so old that he knew it by heart, so familiar that it left him unstirred and indifferent. He tried to recall how it had once been—the excitement, the tension, the bitter-sweet taste of danger—but these things were dead now and no trace of them was left within him.

Sam Jackman pushed away from the saloon wall and moved out into the street, standing there with his hat on the back of his head and his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

"I guess you thought I'd go high-tailing through the brush like a scared jackrabbit," Jackman said.

Blake came on, without speaking and without breaking his measured stride.

Jackman said, "but I ain't the running kind, mister, and that star of yours don't mean a thing to me—except something to shoot at."

Blake stopped, said, "Unbuckle your gunbelt and let it drop. I'm taking you to Fort Grant for trial."

Jackman laughed and the bright flecks of reckless light danced across his eyes.

Blake spoke from a memorized formula, his voice dry and colorless. "Up at Grant, you'll get a fair trial. This way, you won't have any chance at all."

Jackman laughed again. "The big curly wolf always meets a bigger wolf, some day."

Blake dropped his cigarette. "All right," he said. "It's your choice."

He saw the betraying flicker in Jackman's eyes then; saw his elbow bend and move backwards. This rash youngster had cut a wide swath through the Territory; he had a quick-built reputation, and Blake watched the swift fall of his hand with a remote and professional interest. Accurately he timed the movement and drew against it, beating it so easily that his bullet caught Jackman with gun half raised.

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HE saw the reckless set of the man's features break, saw his eyes darken with pain and a fear that had nothing to do with earthly things. The gun exploded when it was still in Jackman's holster; his hand came up and pressed against his chest. He took one step and fell. A little whimper ran out of him and he drew a deep and final breath—all while the sound of Blake's shot was still running its echoes back and forth between the buildings.

Doors opened and men drifted out to the street—among them Sheriff Lister and Doctor Compton. The physician turned the fallen man over and felt his pulse. He then picked up his hat and covered his face with it.

In that brief interval a girl, running out of the Palace, pushed through the crowd. She knelt beside Jackman and lifted his head, holding it tight against her breast.

She called his name again and again, shaking him a little. "Answer me, Sam," she begged. "Say something to me. It's Inez, darling; please speak to me. I love you so much, Sam, I—"

Her words trailed off, against the hard realization that Sam Jackman was dead. She lowered his head and pushed the dark hair back from his forehead; her fingers moved gently across his face, brushing away the dust.

She raised her eyes and looked at Blake. "You trapped him in this town," she said, "because you knew he'd come here to be near me. He didn't care if I was a dance-hall girl; he loved me; and I loved him even if he was a little wild and foolish—and now you've murdered him!"

She got up and took a step toward Blake. "You and your guns and your courts, killing people and sending them to prison because they break one of your damn' laws. I knew you in Arizona, saw the people there walk away from you and hate you. I hate you, too. I wish I were a man; I'd tear your black heart out with my bare hands. And if I were afraid of your gun, I'd lay out in the brush and shoot you in the back. I'd leave you for the buzzards to tear your flesh!"

Blake looked at the girl, showing no emotion and making no reply. He thought of the two men that Jackman and another wild kid had murdered for a pouch of gold—old men, shot in the back. And he remembered how the wife of one of these had said, "My husband was kind and honest; he never harmed nobody in all his life."

For one moment Blake considered telling the girl these things, then decided against it and turned away.

To Sheriff Lister, he said, "Take this money and have the body shipped to Ed Jackman at Casson Springs. They're good folks; they'll want to give their boy a decent burial."

Blake moved on into the saloon then, putting his hand on Doctor Compton's arm and taking the physician along with him. He ordered drinks; took a paper out of his pocket.

"Here's a death certificate," he said. "Fix it up and sign it."

The doctor asked the bartender for pen and ink, filled out the form and gave it back to Blake. He in turn pinned the certificate to the warrent for Sam Jackman's arrest and returned the papers to his pocket.

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MEN had trailed in from the street and one of them said, "It's just a sort of business deal with you, ain't it, mister? Folks down here don't care much for your kind of a lawman."

Blake appraised the speaker with a brief, inexpressive stare. Deliberately he placed his hand against the man and shoved him aside, then walked out of the saloon and down to the red painted telegraph office.

He addressed a wire to the United States marshal at Fort Grant:

> Close file on Sam Jackman what next?

There was no one in the room except the operator, and Blake took a seat against the yonder wall, listening to the metallic click of the telegraph instrument.

Outside, shadows lengthened and a through freight passed, filling the town with its rattle. The telegraph instrument fell silent. When it came to life again, the operator took down the reply to Blake's message and gave it to him:

> Jackman file closed stop accomplice definitely identified as the Tonto Kid, known to you by sight and now in Braxton stop get him dead or alive.

Blake folded the yellow sheet, put it in his pocket and returned to his seat.

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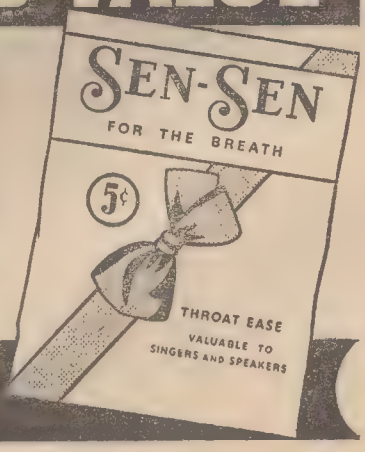

DON'T OFFEND...USE SEN-SEN

One word in the telegram stood out in his mind, and around it gathered a long string of memories.

Braxton.

He remembered the day he had first seen Nelle Spain, on the streets of his native Trail City; remembered how blue her eyes were and how the Texas sun had touched her yellow hair—remembered her slow smile and quiet, unhurried manner.

Some unprecedented boldness had come to Blake that afternoon, impelling him to speak to her: "You're new here, aren't you?"

And now he recalled her answer: "Yes, I live at Braxton, down near the Border. I've come here to teach in the new school."

The days which followed came back and passed in review for Blake Ramsey. Dancing with Nelle at the old barracks; the lively swing of the music and the heat of the room coloring her cheeks. . . . The way she had looked at him and spoke to him and moved a little closer in his arms.

Riding with her on the high mesa, coming home while dusk gathered across a land where bear grass lifted its white bloom against the gray-green of mesquite. Then the night when Nelle had kissed him, saying, "I love you, too—I'll always love you. . . ." Blake remembered the scent of sage and wild rose and that a new moon had stood against the sky like a silver crescent.

And into this reverie came thoughts of Bill Catron dark as a storm cloud. Catron's dominance of the range grew, and the ruthlessness of his riders increased, until life in Trail City became a thing of fear, of furtive whisperings and barred doors, of cut fences and burned houses. And men shot down in cold blood.

BLAKE built up a cigarette and forgot to light it, his mind centered on the decision he had made to stop Catron, and what Nelle had said about that: "Let somebody else do it, Blake; there's a wildness in you that must never be uncovered. You'll kill Bill Catron, and other such men will come to take his place. There'll never again be peace for you, or for those who love you."

But another voice had spoken to Blake, inexorable and strong beyond denial. He called up another picture of Bill Catron, his eyes glazed and his mouth dropped open, dying on his feet; guns booming in the day and in the night until decent men and women might again walk the streets of Trail City without danger. . . . For Blake Ramsey was the sheriff of a newly formed county.

Among these pictures was one of Nelle Spain standing at the steps of a southbound stagecoach, her eyes dark and troubled, her voice gentle with regret, "Goodbye, dear. I'd never be happy or make you happy, seeing you leave home each morning and never knowing whether you'd come back."

After that, a Ranger's commission for Blake Ramsey; later a call to the Territory and a deputy United States marshal's badge. And now, nine long, smoky years had passed and he was going to Braxton, where he might—or might not—see Nelle Spain again.

In the telegraph office, thinking of these things, Blake looked at his cigarette and lit it. It was his custom to close his mind against each day as it passed, but retrospect had opened a gate and it still stood ajar. He thought of how Sam Jackman had whimpered, lying there in the dust; of how the girl, Inez, had said, "I saw people in Arizona walk away from you and hate you."

Suddenly Blake felt old, and there was in him an emptiness and a deep, long-gathered loneliness, bitter and unfriendly.

When it was time for the six o'clock train, he stood among those who gathered at the station. Among them, yet standing apart, he felt, like something tangible, the antagonism of these people. Yet he was without resentment, without particular interest in either them or what they thought.

When the train pulled in he went aboard and walked through it, glancing at the passengers. He finally selected a seat in the rear coach and rode there, a still, remote figure.

It was noon of the next day when he arrived at Braxton. He ate at a restaurant across from the station and went on to

the town's one hotel for a few hours of sleep. Thus, it was past mid-afternoon when he came back to the streets.

He had a drink at the Tehanner Saloon, lingering a while and listening to the talk; he walked down to Morley's Stable and looked at the horses, noting the brands with a practiced eye. He bought a sack of tobacco at the Braxton Mercantile and had a cup of coffee at the restaurant where he had previously eaten.

A small Negro, very black and completely bald, sat flat on the ground outside the hardware store, touching the strings of a banjo and singing in a low, plaintive voice to the loose group surrounding him:

"Walking easy, talking easy;
Letting trouble go on by."

Blake paused at the edge of the crowd and when the Negro looked up at him, he said, "Alabama. . . . They're hunting 'possums down there now."

The Negro smiled, then looked at his banjo and began shaking his head. "Yassuh," he said, "they sho' is hunting 'em, across the swamps and up through the hills. I done been away too long—way yonder too long."

Later Blake stood at the Wells-Fargo office and watched the Border stage roll in. The Negro came from the feed barn, carrying his banjo and a tight-rolled bundle.

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HE stopped and grinned at Blake. "White man, you sho' spoke a rambling word to me—I'm getting down to the Gulf and catching a freighter home."

Blake flipped him a silver dollar. "Buy yourself a drink in New Orleans. One question before you go."

The Negro's eyes rolled. "*Unh-uh*—I figured there was a star in your pocket, or maybe pinned inside your vest. Boss, I'se deef, dumb and blind."

Blake said, "Nothing like that. I just want to know if you've ever heard of a Miss Nelle Spain—if there's such a person living here in Braxton."

The Negro's smile came back. "Yassuh, everybody know Miss Nelle; she's the finest white lady in this town. She teaches at the schoolhouse up yonder on the side of the hill."

Blake expelled a long-drawn breath. "Buy yourself two drinks," he told the Negro, and gave him another dollar.

After the stage had gone on eastward, Blake crossed to the hotel and idled beneath its canopy. He was there when a girl turned the corner at the Mercantile and passed the hotel: she was small and slender, the shine of her hair yellow as gold against the evening shadows.

She stopped dead still. Her hand lifted and pressed against her throat, her eyes widened.

"Blake Ramsey!" she said softly. "It's been a long time—a long time since I've seen you."

He said, "Yes, a long time," and removed his hat with grave courtesy.

For a moment they looked at each other, then Nelle Spain said, laughing tremulously, "It—it's hard to realize that you are here," and moved on down the street, touching his arm so that he walked along with her.

Memories lay heavily upon these two and held them to silence until they were well beyond the last building of the business area.

Finally Blake said, "All these years, and—and you haven't married?"

She looked at the reach of flatlands southward, looked and walked along and waited before answering him.

Then she said, "No, I've taught school and—it's been hard, Blake, because I heard so much about what you were doing, how dangerous it was, and how it was—" She left it unfinished.

"Go on," he told her.

"And how it was changing you, and the kind of man it was making of you."

He spoke a little quicker than was his custom, "You were right, Nelle, there *was* something in me that never should have been released. Something that grew strong and justified itself in the name of duty. It's a difficult thing to understand, this clinging to a job that is both so thankless and so unfriendly."

He paused and twisted together a cigarette and lit it. "The years have been hard for me, too—empty lonely years. Bitter ones. . . ."

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THEY came to the Spain house and went through the yard, finding seats on the far end of the porch.

She leaned toward him and put her hand on his arm. When she spoke, her voice was deeply urgent, "This is all that I've had to hope for, Blake: that you would finally realize that happiness is a quiet thing—that you would tire of strife; that you'd feel duty had demanded enough of you and that it was time for you to begin living your own life. I've held to this and prayed for it and waited for it—all these years."

Inside, someone brought a lamp up to the front room and its light spilled out the windows; a small bell raised a thin, brassy clamor.

"Supper," Nelle said. "You must come in and eat with us and meet my father and mother."

She silenced his protests with a peremptory gesture. "Of course you are," she told him, and took his hand and led him into the house.

Blake immediately liked Nelle's parents. Sitting at the table with them, he felt their friendliness and the warm hospitality of their house.

There was a bowl of flowers on the table, and above the sideboard a wall-clock swung its pendulum busily. From the kitchen, came the smell of spice and freshly baked bread. Through the open door of an adjacent room, Blake saw the neat spread of a bed; curtains at the windows, and a hooked rug on the floor.

He thought then that a man was a fool to let life deny him these things, giving him in exchange only greasy restaurants, second-rate hotels and dry camps, where it was often too risky to even light a fire against the chill and loneliness of the nights. . . .

The yard gate slammed and footsteps crossed the porch, coming on through the house. Nelle pushed back her chair, her eyes bright and eager.

"It's Ben," she said, and got up.

A tall young man entered the room, made an abrupt stop and stood like that.

Nelle said proudly, "My brother. Ben, this is Blake Ramsey."

Color drained from the boy's cheeks. He wet his lips; his features shifting through a swift series of changes. Then he got hold of himself and grinned, his eyes narrowing a little.

He said, "Howdy—I was kinda surprised, not expecting any company." The recklessness in him showed, cool and insolent and dangerous.

Blake spoke to him and went on eating and talking casually, neither his words nor his manner betraying anything.

Nelle said, "Ben is just back from your part of the country, Blake: a trip through Arizona and Nevada. . . . You don't know how good it is to have him home again!"

Ben Spain's glance ran out to Blake, deliberately wicked, "I drifted across the Territory with a fellow named Sam Jackman. Been expecting him down here, but a drummer came in on the evening train and was telling me that he saw Sam last night, headed for Casson Springs—he seemed to think it might be a long time before Sam got to Braxton."

Blake said, "I see," and met Spain's stare, his own eyes mild and inexpressive.

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THE meal moved along and talk passed between these men, too casual and a little too friendly. Blake saw Nelle notice this, and he saw her quizzical glances upon her brother and upon himself.

She quit eating and sat quite still, secret thoughts filling her eyes with dark fear.

Ben Spain pushed back his chair. "I've got some business in town—I reckon you'll be along pretty soon?"

Blake nodded.

"I'll be at the Tehanner," Spain said pointedly. "Don't forget to look me up."

Blake said, "I'll look you up," and pushed his own chair back a little, waiting like that until Spain left the room.

There was in Blake Ramsey a rigid self-discipline, and he spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Spain easily and pleasantly, thanking them for their hospitality and saying good-bye.

Nelle followed him to the door and walked with him across the yard, neither of them speaking until they reached the gate.

Then she said, "Ben—about the man

you've come here to arrest: you've known him in Arizona under some other name?"

Blake's tone was flat and tired. "Yes, as the Tonto Kid; the warrant's made out that way. I've given him this chance to get away, Nelle. It's something I've never given any other man in all the years I've worn a star."

She shook her head. "He won't run. He's wild and reckless, Blake; I've been afraid of something like this."

For a long interval they regarded each other wordlessly. Then Nelle put her hand against the gate and pushed it open.

"If we're going to the Columbia River country," she said, "why should one day—or one warrant—stand between us and happiness? Why couldn't we leave on the night train and mail in your resignation from—" She stopped, knowing this man and realizing the futility of such talk.

A rider passed along the street, raking up a dry smell of dust, and a Mexican boy and girl passed by, their murmurs and laughter drifting softly back.

"If you should—if my brother should be killed," Nelle said, "neither you nor I wouldn't ever be able to forget it; all the rest of our lives would be just as the past nine years have been."

Blake said, "I know." His hand touched her very gently, then he made a quick turn and went through the gate and down the street.

He passed the feed barn; the Mercantile and the Wells-Fargo office, his senses sharply attuned to all the sounds and shapes of this night.

At the hotel entrance, someone spoke his name, and he saw Bob Hergolt just outside the door, saw the shine of his star and the vigilant set of his features.

Hergolt said, "Fort Grant wired me to come down here and meet you; figured there might be some trouble."

Blake shrugged. "Maybe not."

Hergolt came closer. "The Kid's over at the saloon, talking. A tough bunch of Border-jumpers are waiting to back his play."

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BLAKE nodded. "Wait here until I'm inside the Tehanner," he told the other deputy marshal.

Hergolt made a quick protest, but Blake said again, "Wait here," and walked away.

Once he stopped and examined his guns, then stood for a moment, looking at the ponies lined up outside the feed barn.

"They won't be watching for a rider," he said aloud, and unhitched one of the horses and stepped up to the saddle.

He went back along the street at an easy lope, pulled up at the saloon and dismounted without hurry. Then he ducked swiftly under the bar of the hitch-rack and was through the bat-wing doors. His back was against the near wall before those waiting outside realized what had happened.

Ben Spain stood at the bar, taking a drink. His muscles set and his hand held the glass suspended in midair. Blake's flat stare and the stillness of his manner held the others just as they were.

Blake said, "All right, Kid; unbuckle your belt."

Ben Spain put his glass down care-

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fully. "This is one time you've overplayed your hand, Ramsey. Braxton is my town, and these are my friends. You'll never get out of this room alive."

"That isn't the idea, son," Blake told him with unaccustomed patience. "I've got orders to bring you in—dead or alive—and I'm carrying out those orders, one way or the other. What happens to me hasn't got anything to do with it."

He went a step closer to Ben Spain. "You could have all the Border-jumpers from Ensenada to Matamoros backing you, but with us facing each other as we are, you wouldn't have a chance. Sam Jackman was good with a gun—better than you or any of these men with you. Yet he wasn't fast enough to get me. Remember that."

His tone was flat and uncompromising, his face perfectly still. He waited like that.

Tiny beads of perspiration shone on Ben Spain's forehead. He leaned away from the bar, then leaned back, indecision that strong upon him. Then a ripple crossed his eyes and his arms stiffened and moved downward.

• • •

BLAKE saw this and, out of the corner of his eye he caught a quick picture of three or four men who had come through the door. He glimpsed Sam Hergolt standing behind them, catching them flat-footed and holding them very still, their hands away from the holsters.

Blake said again, "Unfasten your belt." The flat tone of his voice forced the matter, clearly and definitely.

Ben Spain swallowed and moved his shoulders uneasily; very slowly he lifted his hands and touched the buckle of his belt. The gun dropped. It struck the brass bar-rail, spun out of the holster and clattered on the floor.

Blake shifted his attention to the other men. "There are enough of you here to kill me, but several of you would be losers. The first one would be Ben Spain, so all your trouble would go for nothing. Besides that, another deputy marshal would come, and then another. Law and order is having its day in this country, and you men might as well get used to it."

He lay a close attention upon them, watching for a break. It came when their tension lessened into a slight hesitancy and he immediately stepped forward, snapping one handcuff on Ben Spain's wrist, holding the other in his left hand and leading Spain to the door.

Hergolt spoke an easy word, and the men there moved aside. Blake pushed Spain out to the street and Hergolt followed, grinning a little.

They walked down to the depot and stood there a while, talking. Then Hergolt snapped the open handcuff on his own left wrist and took Ben Spain inside to wait for the northbound train that would be along within the hour.

Whereupon Blake turned back toward town and found Nelle waiting for him where a post-lantern marked the end of the station platform.

"I was at one of the saloon windows," she told him. "I saw it all, it was so deadly that I couldn't scream—couldn't breathe. Ben has broken the law and deserves to be arrested and punished, yet it's hard to believe that you'd have killed my brother. . . . That you would have put any duty ahead of his life—when his death would have always been a barrier between us."

Blake said, "Not ahead of *his* life my dear. Ahead of my own."

He lifted his guns from their holsters and gave them to her. A faint understanding touched her and she pushed aside the blocks and turned the cylinders. Every chamber was empty.

"After finding you again," he told her, "nothing could have made me risk losing you—certainly not the mere privilege of going on breathing, regretting. That—that isn't living, Nelle."

She dropped the guns and went to him, moving against him and putting her arms around him.

He held her close. "I sent in my resignation by Hergolt. If we leave here in the morning, we can be in Oregon sometime next week."

She said, "Then we'll be there next week," and she lifted her face for him to kiss.

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

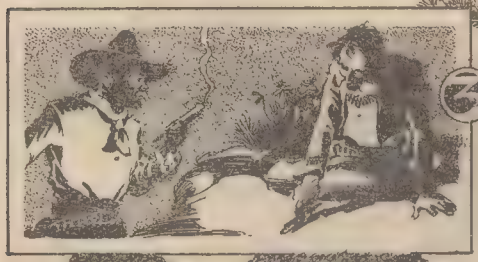
· HARRY LOVE ·

1

Here is a "Believe it or Not" story of a man who succeeded in doing single handed what dozens of peace officers, backed by heavily armed posses, failed to accomplish. Born in Texas, Harry Love spent his boyhood fighting Comanches; served with such distinction in the Mexican War that he was made Captain of U.S. Scouts while still in his early twenties.

2

His big bid for fame came when he migrated to California and took up the chase of Joaquin Murieta, scourge of the Golden State. Historians paint Murieta as a kind of Robin Hood, but the truth is he was as tricky a combination of horse thief-highwayman-murderer as ever flaunted Law. Sheriffs and marshals despaired, for Murieta eluded all their efforts to capture him for years.



3

However, Love's labor was not lost. First contact he made with the gang he killed Three Fingered Jack, Murieta's infamous lieutenant. Some weeks later he captured the bandit's brother-in-law, Reyes Feliz, who was launched into Eternity by a Los Angeles "neck-tie" party. The outlaws fled, but Love next ferreted out their hiding place, and in the blistering battle which followed slew a dozen of them, including the blue-blooded but bloody-handed Claudio.

4

Murieta took it on the lam; in vain he dodged and twisted the length and breadth of California. Harry harried him at every turn; caught up with him one morning in camp. Murieta jumped on his favorite stallion, jumped him over a precipice. The horse was killed, but Murieta fled on foot. Not far, however, for Love filled him full of ·44 slugs, putting an end to the desperado who had ravaged California for over a decade. Thus one man outwitted and outfought a whole gang of bloodthirsty ruffians, a remarkable achievement which places Harry Love in the front rank of heroes who made frontier History.

Friar Robusto's Gold-Camp

A thrilling novelette of one of the most famous characters in frontier fiction!

That peculiar combination of saint and devil, Friar Robusto, must make his most dangerous pilgrimage to Jackass Bar — to collect from its roistering, brawling citizens a fortune in honest, untainted gold!

CHAPTER ONE

Candidate for the Hang-Mob Noose

FRIAR ROBUSTO, that singular, many-sided man of holy robes, had proved to the most critical that he was first of all a Capuchin monk, a great

Pilgrimage

By Harry F. Olmsted

Tolliver came forward, clutching swiftly for the poke of dust. . . .

and good man devoted to the furtherance of mission welfare. But, by the same token, he had hidden from men another, nocturnal side of his nature—as necessary to his state of well-being as food and drink—not to mention the incidental good achieved in sly, unheralded ways. Now, however, excitement had been slow and life boring to Robusto, when Padre Ma-

nuel, the father incumbent at Mission San Gabriel, announced his premonition of approaching death.

"My children," he told the monks and lay brothers, "my days are few and I wish to add a wing to my beloved mission as a monument to the glory of *El Dios* before I leave the world. We will build it yonder of good adobe from the *monte* and fine straight *vegas* from the sierra."

Whatever of scalawag and imposter there was in Robusto, he held an honest love for Father Manuel. That affection motivated his protest. "Alas, Father, adobe and pine beams, like flesh and bones, soon crumble into dust. Your monument should be as lasting as the Word. Therefore, the base of your monument should be of enduring granite, the dome of finest Italian marble, the windows of stained glass from Old Castile. . . .

"I have an idea," Robusto argued. "Fortunes are being taken from the river beds of the north. Godless men harvest wealth and squander it in dissipation. Surely it is a worthy act for me to carry the Word to such wastrels and show them the glory of contributing to your monument, Father Manuel."

So, having the blessing of the father incumbent, Friar Robusto set his sandaled feet northward, trudging through the hot, dusty midland valleys and climbing into the timbered heights of blue mountains.

After two months of weary traveling, Robusto found himself among the moiling hordes panning for gold along the brawling rivers of the Sierra Nevada—men unlike any he had ever seen.

Men of strangely mixed impulses, they exacted the last grain of wealth from the sands, only to waste it riotously on women, games and whiskey.

Robusto could understand this, for such had been his own habits before donning the holy robes of the padre he had found dying on the desert. Since then he had curbed his godless hungers in a fierce crusade to help the poor, the weak and the ignorant.

⁂

IN HIS contact with the miners, Robusto found them uniformly willing to add their pinch of dust to his leathern sack. But because of the high price of food, there were few invitations to share a meal. And it took all the wealth he could get from them just to keep himself.

He was hungry, discouraged and uncertain when later he espied the twinkling fire on the creek bank not far from Jackass Bar, latest bonanza diggings to draw gold-mad men.

Before he reached the blaze, a chorus of obscene song came to his ears. The cause of the conviviality was plain as he stepped into the flamelit circle. Four bearded, red-shirted men ringed the fire, drinking from a demijohn which passed from hand to hand.

All four came up, blinking. "By the Lord, a Holy Joe!" croaked a giant. "Come an' set on your shirt-tail, Parse. Have a nip."

"Pax vobiscum," murmured Robusto, signing the cross. "I need food more than drink, gold for the holy cause more than either. For those who contribute, I will burn candles on the new mission altar at Mission San Gabriel." He held out his sack. "Who will give for the Lord's blessing?"

"So!" The giant scowled. "A Holy Joe that's too good to drink with us, but ain't too good to beg for our dust. Nothin' doin', you church louse. Get the hell out before we throw you in the creek."

Another of the quartet shook his head. "No use, Sam. With a belly like his'n, he'd float. Nope, you gotta think up somethin' better'n the creek."

"Betcha an ounce he don't float!" cackled one.

"Yah, I take dat," laughed the Dutchman, pulling out a poke. "I bet he floats."

Bets were laid, and four maudlin, unsteady men closed in on the friar, rushing him at a signal from the giant. Robusto knew fear rather than anger—fear that their clutching hands would disrobe him, revealing the fact that his apparently stout midriff was really a pouched belt containing—among other things—two pistols and a knife. It was this fear that caused him to elude their first rush and dart into the brush.

Robusto didn't run far. He slipped into a thicket with the noiselessness of a fawn, and then watched the puffing quartet return to their fire and the demijohn.

The man called Sam wiped his beard

on his sleeve, hauled a long poke from his pocket. "Bet's is off, boys," he bawled. "Let the Holy Joe go. I'm for headin' into Jackass Bar an' buckin' the tiger."

"Ach!" protested Dutch Herman. "You lose all your dust. Dose saloon games, dey iss crooked."

"What of it?" countered Sam. "Plenty more dust where this came from. What we diggin' 'er for, if not to spend it? An' if we catch the dealer cheatin', we take him apart!"

He took another long pull at the jug and staggered down the creek. Robusto followed him, his brow wrinkled in perplexity.

"Think, Robusto," he argued. "Surely it is better that we turn this wastrel's gold into the church than to let him be robbed by a conscienceless dealer."

"But that would be stealing, my friend," countered his other self.

"Aye, stealing to forestall two sins of commission, Robusto."

"But still stealing, padre. And tarnishing the memory of Father Manuel."

A voice came drifting from the fire. "Hey, Sam! Keep yore eyes skinned back and your pistol ready. Lots of robbin' lately."

Sam's laugh struck back, but Robusto saw his hand drop to his belted gun as he staggered along the trail. Like a ghost, the friar dogged him, past the gopher holes where men tore up the earth to wrest out the precious yellow metal. Fires winked through the night and snatches of song and the mutter of voices became more evident as the glare of Jackass Bar neared.

It was while climbing a timbered rise that Robusto closed with Sam in a noiseless rush, twisting the miner's coat collar tight to prevent outcry, and bludgeoning him on the angle of the jaw as he struggled. Sam folded up like a rag.

CHAPTER TWO

Robusto's Good Deed

GENTLY, Robusto carried the unconscious miner off the trail and laid him down. For a long moment he hesitated, as if loath to take the next step. Then he removed the heavy poke

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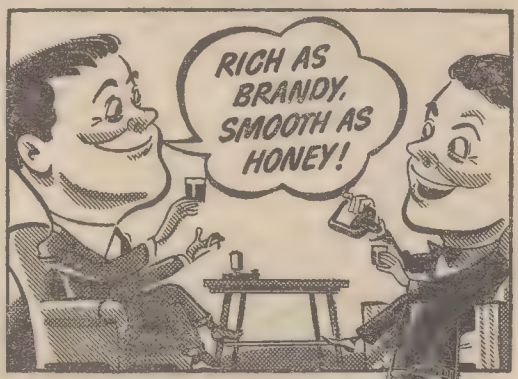

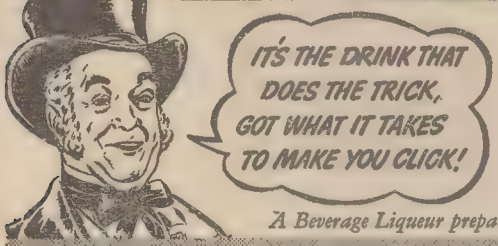

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from Sam's pocket, placed it in his own belt.

"Not like ordinary theft, Robusto," he told himself. "Here lies a drunkard, robbed of his senses, unable to defend himself or protect his property from evil men. So you will take his gold and hold it in trust for him, God willing. When he comes to you and demands it, you will of course return it to him. Should he have been too drunk to know what happened to him, his money will do him great honor in Father Manuel's monument. Am I not right, Robusto?"

"You are a clever fellow, Robusto," chuckled his other self. "How else could you better prepare for the peaceful rest of Sam's soul?"

An hour later, a full mile beyond Jackass Bar, Robusto found a fire tended by Chinese miners who gave him rice and made him welcome. He fell asleep beside the blaze, full fed and philosophic.

He could not have slept long when he was roused by the strident clangor of a distant bell. Its harsh, commanding tone brought instant restlessness to the Chinese miners.

"What is that?" demanded Robusto of the Orientals.

"Bad man lob mine," chattered one. "Some fella catch hang plitty quick."

Robusto took his leave, following the summons, coming eventually to the muddy street of Jackass Bar, into which trails and ravines were pouring their human streams from the diggings. Tents and shacks lined the street, all radiating from a log saloon boasting an elegance all out of tune with its surroundings.

A crowd jammed the big building, overflowed to the street, where a host of excited miners strained to hear the deliberations inside. Edging through the crush, Robusto paused to regard a young woman standing alone at the corner of the Bonanza Saloon, back to the logs and was fending off the jamming miners. But it was her face that caught Robusto's interest. Misery was painted there, fear and utter hopelessness.

Robusto went to her, cupped his palm under her firm chin. She was lovely, even in her misery, her blue eyes and golden hair waking an added sense of loneliness in Robusto's heart.

"My child," he said gently. "You are troubled. What grieves you?"

"Padre!" she clutched at the sleeve of his cassock. "Is there nothing you can do for Wayne? The miner's court has him, and they hang all who face them, even though their guilt is not proved. . . ." She was sobbing now. "They claim they have proof that Wayne slugged and robbed a miner just outside of the diggings . . . . He always seemed so good, so different from the rest. But Shelly warned me, tried to tell me Wayne was not the man for me."

"Ah," hummed Robusto, rubbing his pate. "Shelly is—?"

"Wayne's stepbrother, Padre—Shelly Mandell. Wayne and Shelly work a claim up Rattlesnake Gulch, Shelly's claim. They arrested Wayne and hauled him in here. When somebody suggested Shelly might be in on it too, Wayne confessed that he alone was guilty. Shelly has admitted Wayne left their camp before Sam Tolliver was robbed."

Robusto started. "Sam—*who?*"

"Sam Tolliver. He works a claim with Dutch Herman and . . . . Oh, here they come now!"

The crowd at the saloon door fell back and a wedge of exultant men marched out. In their midst, two men clung to the arms of a white-faced youngster who walked courageously, faltering only as his roving glance picked up the girl.

MOST of those who ringed the doomed man had plainly drunk much. They were grinning, capering and firing their pistols into the air, making a holiday out of taking a human life. And the drunkest of all was Sam Tolliver himself, the giant who had bet Robusto would sink after they had flung him into the creek waters.

The friar's heart swelled and shrank at once, swelled with rage that this five-minute jury was condemning an innocent man, and fell with regret that the fund for Father Manuel's memorial must again languish just as it was showing healthy growth. For now Robusto must give Sam Tolliver back his poke without Sam so much as asking for it.

The howling mob spotted Robusto and lifted a roar. "Look—a Holy Joe! Fetch him along to say a prayer for the thief before we drop him. Come on, Padre!"

"Come on, Bible-boy. Foller us to the tree an' sing the condemned a psalm."

A thick-necked man broke from the mob, stepping to the girl. "Courage, Hope," he hiccoughed. "You shouldn't be here to see this. I knew my stepbrother was wild, but I never thought that he'd rob. . . ."

He pulled the grief-stricken girl close, and Robusto saw passion flame in his big eyes. Dully, Robusto fell into the procession, halting beneath the spreading tree, where someone had already thrown a rope over a jutting limb. Willing hands made the seven-wrap hangknot, fixed it over the victim's head. Then Robusto was shoved to the front until he faced the condemned youth, who stood there with the courage of a martyr.

"My son," began Robusto, but the youth cut him off.

"Say me a prayer, Father," he said irritably. "Let's get this over."

"There is peace in prayer, and also peace sometimes in acts more material," murmured Robusto. "One moment." He raised his hand and loosed a bellow that stilled the mob voice. "Where's Sam Tolliver?"

"Here I be!" The giant stepped forward, his blank face working. "What you want of me?"

From an inner pocket of his girdle, Robusto drew a leathern poke. "Do you know this, Tolliver?"

"Hey, that's mine!" yelped Tolliver, leaping forward, clutching for the dust. "The one Mandell stole offa me."

"No!" denied Robusto. "This is the poke you placed in my hands for safe keeping. You were so drunk, Tolliver, you do not even remember what you did. And on such drunken evidence, this court condemns an innocent man to death. Shame on you all."

They stared at him aghast, and for a full minute the strung silence held. Then, with a roar, men came to life, suddenly frightened at their nearness to a ghastly mistake. One slapped his palm across Tolliver's bearded cheek, jarring him.

"Take your poke, you magpie-chatterin' simpleton," he blared. "An' keep your snoot out of a jug if you can't hold liquor better than that. Boys, we owe young Wayne Mandell a rip-snortin' drunk. An' Holy Joe too, for bein' Johnny-on-the-spot. Belly up to my bar, boys' an' lets celebrate."

This great-chested, full-bearded man, in the fancy dress of a saloonman, bore down on Robusto and the youth who's life Robusto had saved. But young Wayne Mandell refused the offer and trudged into the timber, away from the girl who still stood across the street, held in the arms of his stepbrother.

Robusto also refused the saloonman's offer. "Thanks, my friend," he murmured, "but the spirits at your bar are too high, as those of yonder youth are too low. I feel that I can ease his hurt . . ." Robusto strode away, angry with himself.

Striving to raise money for Father Manuel's new mission wing had become a complicated business in Jackass Bar. It irked the friar that, being no nearer his goal than at first, he should take time out to mix in the troubles of others.

"You dolt!" he growled at himself. "You grow weak-minded with the years. You should have broken the neck of that Sam Tolliver, then he couldn't have reported his loss."

CHAPTER THREE

Poison for a Gold-Camp Snake

ROBUSTO lagged behind Wayne Mandell, allowing the youngster time to get hold of himself. But suddenly Wayne had wheeled to face the man who followed him. "What do you want of me?" he cried, ragefully. "Get away and leave me alone." Then, with a sob tearing him: "No, I didn't mean that. I just remembered that I was too upset to thank you for saving my neck."

"Save your thanks," counseled Robusto, "for God, who guided me to Jackass Bar in time to speak a word for you. And for the young lady who told me of your danger, the one called Hope."

Wayne nodded. "I'm grateful for just knowing her, Padre. But I can never face her again. I'll never forget the look

in her eyes when I confessed to stealing Tolliver's poke. It—it made hanging easy."

"Why did you speak that lie, my son?"

"Because of Shelly, Padre. He wants to marry her, and he has so much to offer her, his claim and—"

"Material baubles," snapped the friar. "A poor arm to lean upon. Would you sell her life happiness for the things golddust will buy?"

"It's more than that," the youngster confessed bitterly. "I don't owe Shelly anything, but I couldn't see him hung without a try to save him. He—he's been breaking the laws of the miner's court."

"Madre de Dios!" gasped Robusto. "You must indeed have great love to offer your life for a stepbrother who is a thief."

Wayne snorted. "I can't call it that. What I did was due to my mother's teachings. She taught me to return good for evil, begged me before she died to look after Shelly, who was always wild. Come to the cabin, Padre, and I'll boil some coffee and fry venison."

When the noonday was over, Fray Robusto studied the little cabin and the diggings along the creek. Even at a distance, he could see the glitter of gold in the gravels.

"A rich claim, my son," said the Friar. "You and Shelly must be well off."

"Shelly is. But me—I staked a claim up Hoosier Gulch, but lost it when a gang of claim-jumpers moved in. Shelly asked me to come down here and help him hold his. Between us, we saved his, but I lost mine. Now, Padre, if you'll excuse me, I'll get to work. Shelly raises Cain if I don't earn my keep."

He rose from the table, but Robusto forced him down with a strength that amazed the younger man.

"Sit," he commanded. "You're good and fair and you hew to the Rules. It becomes a man to walk humbly before the Lord and to accept the evil with uncomplaining meekness. True, the master turned the other cheek—but he also drove the evil money changers from the temple. Stand up for your rights, my son, and do not turn your back on life's rewards. It is right that you share the fruits of this claim, wrong that you labor here for food while another man takes the girl who loves you."

"Loves *me?*" gasped the boy. "You think . . . ?"

"That is certain, if I read her aright. And as for her eyes when you confessed, they will blaze with admiration when she learns why you lied. It was a brave thing you did, although a foolish sacrifice. Now you must think of yourself; evil men must trample you no longer. If you would be worthy of Hope, you must learn to fight for your rights."

Under his preachment, Wayne's eyes glittered. It was then that bootsteps sounded on the claim and hulking Shelly Mandell came to the cabin, his bull voice waking harsh echoes.

"Ain't started to work yet, eh? Settin' here chewin' the rag with a hen-cacklin' priest while the claim goes to hell. I can't even trust you—"

"—to get myself hung while you build up to my girl," broke in Wayne, rising. "You can go to hell, Shelly, do your own work around here, unless you change. I'm sick and tired of slaving for you. I fronted for you this morning, and you pay off by tellin' the court I left here just before Tolliver was robbed. You lied, Shelly, and if you'd lie my life away, you'd lie as quick to turn Hope against me."

"Hope!" sneered Shelly. "A kid like you talkin' about a beauty like her. Don't let me hear you talkin' about her or I'll knock your head off. Get out to the creek and start them sluices runnin'. I'll need plenty dust when I take Hope to Marysville on our honeymoon."

Wayne paled. "She's going to marry you?"

"She don't know it, but she is," laughed the big man. "Tonight I get her to say yes. Get out there now, or—"

"This!" barked Wayne, slammed his fist into the bearded face of his stepbrother.

■

SHELLEY staggered back to the wall, then slid down. For a moment he sat there, eyeing the blood dripping onto his lap from his flattened nostrils. Then he came up, roaring and rushing. They came together with a crash, their fists flashing.

Robusto hugged the fire, his sandaled feet drawn under him, his lips smiling faintly.

Here was a spectacle Jackass Bar would have paid royally to see, and he had it all to himself. Nor was he concerned about the outcome. Wayne had awakened, as if after a long sleep. He was fighting the good fight. And if his lesser strength should not prevail against Shelly's greater power . . . Robusto flexed his own iron muscles under the folds of his cassock.

The two angry men strained together. Then Shelly hurled Wayne against the wall. The younger man bounced back, his fists smashing and putting Shelly on the floor again. The bigger man rose more slowly this time, launching himself doggedly. Wayne danced away, peppering the man's face with punishing blows.

A full arm swing to the throat put Shelly down again, groaning: "I got enough. You hit me when I wasn't lookin'!"

"One who fights to win must watch his foe at all times," said Robusto. "And so, because you lost, big fellow, you lose also the stakes for which you fought—the young lady called Hope and one half of this claim. Get paper and pencil, Wayne, my son."

Shelly stared at him as he rose, plainly unable to credit his senses. "You talk like a crazy man instead of a priest. You hear what he said, kid?"

"I heard him," said Wayne.

"Then tell him he lies," raged the bully. "Tell him you know better than to claim half these diggings."

"No!" said Wayne, tight-lipped. "I lost my own claim saving yours. I think I've earned half. And as far as Hope is concerned . . . ."

"I don't care about Hope," rapped Shelly. "But I'm damned if you get a foot of these diggings. I—"

Robusto said: "Think well, amigo," and caught Shelly by the throat, shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat. The man broke away with a desperate effort, gathered himself.

"You went too far, feller," he raged. "Your cloth can't save you after that."

He hurled himself at Friar Robusto, smashing against him as he might have struck a tree. The friar stood like a rock. His strong hands found Shelly's middle, heaved the man off the floor and smashed him against the wall. On the floor, Shelly screamed and begged, as Robusto jerked him erect.

"Now for that paper, Wayne. Your brother is ready to sign."

It was soon done. The friar dictated the wording; Wayne transcribed it and Shelly signed away a half-interest in his placer, cursing under his breath and whining with fear of the strength of this man of the holy cloth. When he had affixed his signature and after Robusto had signed as a witness, to make the document binding in the eyes of the miner's court, Shelly took his leave.

"You wrung that outa me!" he flung over his shoulder. "I'm tellin' my side of it to the court, an' you'll both have some explain' to do. That quitclaim ain't worth the paper it's wrote on."

"He'll do it, too," said Wayne worried. "The miners are aroused by all the lawlessness taking place, and they'll upset what you've just done. And Hope—she'll

be quick to believe the worst of me. This will finish me with her!"

"Not if I read her eyes right," smiled Robusto. "It may be that I shall have to overtake Señor Shelly and show him the light. As for the girl, you must go to her at once. Do you love her?"

"More than anything in the world, Padre. If I could marry her, nothing else would matter."

"Go tell her that. Meet me this afternoon before the Bonanza Saloon. We'll convert her father and get the matter settled."

WAYNE looked frightened, but he nodded. Robusto took his leave, swinging along the timber-shaded trail at his swift walk. He overtook the still smarting Shelly a mile short of Jackass Bar. The big man whirled as the swish of the friar's gown sounded behind him, leveled his rifle. His inflamed eyes blazed angrily.

"You again!" he snarled. "I orta gut-shoot you an' leave you lay. I would, too, except I'd sooner see the court handle you first and make that paper plumb unlawful. Get marchin', you meddlin' Holy Joe. I'm taking you in to stand trial. Nobody can manhandle Shelly Mandell and get away with it."

Robusto read a deadly determination in Shelly's eyes. Knew that in the man's present temper, talk would be useless. With the cocked rifle bearing upon his middle, there would be time neither to draw a pistol from the girdle underneath his cassock, nor to get his hands on the man. But it was Robusto's boast that he was never totally disarmed.

In his right hand, nestled an egg-shaped rock. Habitually he carried such a missile, and so accurate had he become with it during his long and lonely pilgrimages that it was not uncommon for him to subsist on small game slain by the strength and swiftness of his arm. A flick of his wrist now would have dropped Shelly before he could trigger, but Robusto chose to equivocate.

"Come, my friend," he said, flashing his disarming smile, "let us talk this over. Why should you begrudge your brother his rightful share of the profits of your claim?"

"He ain't my brother, an' he ain't got no rightful share comin'," growled Shelly. "I've overpaid him for what he's done an' shoulda sent him packin' long ago. If I had, he'd have kept away from my gal. Believe me, he sure worked himself into plenty trouble when he turned on me this morning. You ain't talkin' your way out of this, Skyboy, so light out for Jackass. I'll be right behind you, an' if you make one funny move I'll drive lead through your guts."

"You are a hard and sinful man," chided Robusto. "God will punish you."

Shelly threw back his head and roared with laughter. But Robusto's arm flicked in an underhand motion, and the rock caught the man on the forehead. His knees buckled and he sank down in the cushioning pine needles. Robusto moved to his side, stood looking down at him.

"You graceless dog!" he murmured. "I'd like to finish the task I started, but it is unfitting that I kill you as you sleep. By God's mercy, you may be repentant when you awake!"

But in the meantime, there was work for Robusto in Jackass Bar. Without a further look, he turned toward the camp, striding swiftly, his cassock slapping his sturdy calves . . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Captive of Satan's Gunmen

STIRRING events rocked Jackass Bar that day and they were best told by Silent Jack Holligan, a man who wasted few words:

"Eight o'clock in the morning, we're fixing to hang this Wayne Mandell. Nine, he's free; an' at two we're standing around watching the padre who saved Wayne's neck splice him to the gal whose old man presided over the court that ordered Wayne hung earlier. Next, some scamp will find nuggets grown' on trees, and damned if I won't swaller the yarn!"

Robusto, his moon face beaming, read the ceremony that made Wayne Mandell and Hope Random man and wife. Afterward, John Random, the girl's father and owner of the Bonanza Saloon, rolled out a barrel of free whiskey and let joy reign

unrefined. John Random presented the newlyweds with two fast saddle ponies and stood with Robusto, watching the couple ride away for a honeymoon at Marysville.

"Vaya con Dios!" breathed Robusto. "Go with God, my children."

"And be good to her, you scalawag," muttered Random huskily. "Or I'll hang you higher'n Hamen." He turned to Robusto. "What about you, Padre? You've done us a real favor, and we feel like showing you a little gratitude . . . ."

"You owe me nothing," said the friar, and the drawn, aged face of Father Manuel flashed before his vision. "But if you feel that way, you might make a small contribution to the fund I collect to build a wing on the Mission San Gabriel, to the memory of that saintly man — Father Manuel Salviterra. And perhaps you might suggest to the celebrating miners that. . . ."

"Why didn't you say so?" demanded the saloonman expansively, and his great roar commanded silence. When he explained it to the hilarious miners, they were quick to respond. All were flush, the gold shipment to San Francisco being due to leave by stage on the morrow.

Fractional ounces from each poke filled two long leathern bags for Fray Robusto's fund. His heart was light and his mind glowing with a sense of accomplishment as he took leave of his new-found friends and set his sandals southward. But he did not travel with his usual vigor, and the blankness of his eyes indicated deep thought.

"Somewhere near ten thousand dollars," he mused. "Not bad for a start, but a long, long way from my goal. There are many camps such as Jackass Bar, and if each could be made to give as this one has . . . ."

"But Robusto," argued his other, more skeptical self. "Clever fellow as you are, you cannot hope to find a Wayne and Shelly Mandell in each boom camp. Nor a Hope Random. You were lucky. These rough-handed, Godless miners are more likely to contribute blows than gold. And one is constantly in danger of being robbed along the lonely trails."

"True," conceded the friar, after his manner of talking to himself. "But even the most hardened are slow to rob a friar, even should he suspect there was gold under his cassock. Perhaps if I were to return and lay my problem before John Random and others who feel I favored them, the way might be paved for further contributions in neighboring camps."

He came to a halt, considering the wisdom of this course. And it was then that the silence of the forest was sundered by that age-old, compelling command: "Hands up!"

Robusto's wandering thought returned and his strong body stiffened. A glance showed him the yawning muzzles of six-guns jutting from the scrubby thickets. And from further back he caught the muted snorting of a horse. Slowly his hands went up.

"What would you have from a poor servant of God, my children?" he reproved.

"Poor, hell!" came the answer from the lips of a narrow-eyed ruffian who stepped into the clear. "You've got two fat pokes, an' I'll take 'em. Hand over or I'll blow you to glory."

Robusto's heart sank. He was hardly two miles from Jackass Bar and already he was being relieved of his modest start toward a building fund. His hands came down, went into his cassock.

The highwayman, fearing no violence from a friar, could not know that Robusto's fingers were closing over the grip of a fully loaded pistol. But too well Robusto knew that, even though he killed this man and two of his followers, the rest would cut him down, leaving Father Manuel's dream all but impossible of fulfillment. He must not lose sight of his primary purpose here. So he withdrew the two fat pokes.

"This is the wealth of the church, my son," he warned. "Think well before you steal it, if you have any hope of forgiveness in heaven."

"I'll risk my chances," grinned the outlaw, taking the leathern bags. "Take this stuff, Pete. Cass, you bring up the horses."

"And leave this Skyboy here to blab on us?" asked Cass, emerging from his covert. "I plug him an' play safe."

"Better yet," said the leader grimly. "This is the feller who put Shelly out of

commission. I'm taking him back for Mandell to play with. After us bein' outrun by that brother of his an' his gal, Shelly will be sweatin' to shed a little blood."

Robusto remained tight-lipped. The spirit of these men was bad and their cruelty amply proven by their evil expressions. And now, by their words, he knew them to be tied up in outlawry with Shelly Mandell—the man Wayne had offered his life to save from just punishment.

⁂

ASTRIDE a saddle before one of the renegades, Robusto could have easily slain several of them by swift recourse to his guns. But owing to their numbers, the chance was too long, considering that the building fund for Father Manuel's memorial was depleted and that he, Robusto, would then be in no position to push his quest.

After an hour's ride by a little used trail, they brought him down a canyon and to the rear of Shelly Mandell's claim. The leader's hail brought no response, but his entry produced Shelly, his eyes red-rimmed and heavy with drunken sleep.

"You got the Holy Joe, eh?" he croaked. Then to Robusto: "Reckon you laughed, feller, how you downed me with a rock an' me holdin' a drop on yuh. Well, I'm laughin' now. I owe you pay for that, an' for splicin' my gal to that low-down brother of mine. Tie him up, boys, an' throw him in the house. How'd you come out with Wayne, Sundown? Stop him, did you?"

The leader squirmed. "Never got within gunshot of him," he confessed glumly. "He spotted us comin', an' him an' his woman made a run for it."

Shelly went red with rage. "An' you let 'em get away? You whiskey-swillin' turtles! I'd like to know what a man can get done around here without doing it himself. You botch that stage job tomorrow and I'll skin you all alive!"

"You can bet we won't do that," said Sundown, grimly, and with a humility that proved to Robusto that he was second to Shelly in the leadership of this outlaw band. "An' say—did you know the miner's court voted to pay a third to any feller recoverin' stolen clean-ups, lifted gold shipments, or for information leadin' to the arrest of the guilty parties? Ha-ha, that's good, ain't it? John Random told 'em that a third might tempt one of us to betray the rest—an' that a two-thirds return was better than nothin' at all."

The outlaws laughed, all but Shelly Mandell. His face contorted and his eyes blazed. "That man will be sorry he crossed me," he muttered. "He promised he wouldn't stand between me and Hope, then he give her to that weaklin' brother of mine. Hear me—there ain't a man that's crossed me who'll live to see me boss of these diggin's." His eyes burned Friar Robusto. "An' that goes for you, Sky-Boy. Get ropes on him, boys."

They bound the friar's hands behind his back, shoved him roughly into the house, locking him in a stuffy, windowless storage room.

Lying where they had hurled him, Robusto was thankful that they had not ripped off his cassock, thereby he had still his knife and guns. But that lapse would be remedied, he knew. Sometime soon Shelly would come for him, prepared to vent his evil temper on the one who had helped cheat him of the beautiful girl he had coveted . . . . So he went to work on the knots that bound him.

His powerful muscles swelled as he flexed them against his bonds. Pain ran in burning streams from his lacerated wrists. And presently blood dripped from his fingers; his breath came in rough gasps and his body was wet with sweat.

He rested, then struggled again. From beyond the panel came the gurgle of liquor and the banging of the tincups on the board, the slap of cards and the quarrelsome voices of drunken men. For hours Robusto strained at the ropes, but they were well tied in square knots that resisted his weakening efforts.

ALONG toward morning, when his great strength was well sapped, Robusto rested longer than at any time before. He listened, heard Shelly's thick-tongued voice exhorting his men to

make no slip when they halted the dust shipment to San Francisco.

"It's better I don't go with you," he explained. " 'Cause if I was recognized, I'd lose my chance to sit with the miner's court an' learn all the inside information regarding these shipments. When you stop the stage at Inspiration Rock, cut the harness and ride back here fast as God 'll let you. We'll split the loot seven ways an' lay low for awhile. Now git!"

There came the tramp of boots; low laughter, and the roar of horses getting away. Robusto drew a heavy breath, preparatory to a last try at the ropes. Then he thought of the knife in his belt.

When it was free, he came to his hunkers, wedged the haft between his heels —blade up. Pressing the bloody ropes against the edge, he sawed up and down, murmuring a fervent *"Gracios á Dios!"* as the sharp edge bit through the bonds.

Breathing hard, with dull anger replacing his erstwhile hopelessness, Robusto massaged his numb wrists, working circulation into his cramped and weary muscles.

To his ears then came the sullen muttering of Shelly Mandell, the gurgle of a drink being poured. The friar found himself wondering if the man had forgotten him—and he had his answer in the slow pound of boots across the floor and the sound of the lifting of the bar.

Robusto came up, his hands behind him, and stood blinking in the rush of daylight at the flushed face and bloodshot eyes of Shelly Mandell.

"Alive an' kickin', eh," boomed the renegade. "Well, I'll take some of that out of you. Been thinkin' over your case, an' decided it ain't seemly to cut the throat of a priest. But gents like you got to be taught not to mess around with Shelly Mandell. So I'm gonna brand you with a finger across the forehead an' the word 'Meddler' across the chest. The iron's hot, so come on."

"You ill-smelling son of Satan!" rapped the friar, all his violent side coming to the fore. "As long as you live, those who walk with God are in danger. Never have I seen one I could take more pleasure in killing!"

For answer, laughing, Shelly stepped in and struck Robusto in the face.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Cleanup of Jackass Bar

THOUGH the blow was a cruel one, it never so much as rocked Robusto. Moreover, it brought Shelly within reach—a fatal move for a man who would joust with this strange friar.

Robusto's hands flashed out, unmanacled. His left found Shelly's throat, the fingers digging deep as they cut off the renegade's wind.

Fear, surprise and desperation lent Shelly strength and he fought for life. But he might as well have fought against the rush of time. Robusto clung to his throat like grim death to a corpse. He bent Shelly's arm back, threw every ounce of his strength into that throat grip.

Their struggles drew them out into the littered room that reeked of stale smoke and whiskey fumes. But slowly Shelly's face blackened and his eyes protruded. Strength left him and he faded in Robus-

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to's grasp. The friar held on grimly, his grip set. Then he dropped the lax form to the floor, standing shaken and uncertain.

"Who am I," he cried aloud, "to pass a fatal judgment on this man. Forgive me, *Dios*. I am only the instrument through which he must be unmasked and punished by the law of the hills."

"But he is not dead," protested his lesser side. "You only spare him for a further campaign of crime."

"God willing, no," said the friar with finality, and used a sandaled foot to roll Shelly into the cubby. He dropped the bar. Not until then did he take stock of the room.

The place was a hog-sty, the table a mess of loose tobacco, pipes, bottles and stained glasses. But beside these, there were two things of greater interest—the two pokes collected by John Random as a tribute to Father Manuel. These the friar returned to the voluminous pockets of his girdle. And then, quitting the silent cabin, he took his way swiftly down the trail, his cassock flapping about his legs . . . . Later, Robusto caught John Random at breakfast, and the man was honestly glad to see him. "Padre," he exclaimed, "I believed you well on your way to Southern California. What brought you back?"

"The stage carrying the dust of the mines to San Francisco, Señor Random. I learn it is to be stopped at Inspiration Rock, and . . . ."

"A good joke on the highwaymen!" smiled the president of the miner's court. "Only last night we decided to send the gold in a flat bed wagon, by the cut-off road through Grizzly Gulch. It left at daylight. But your word is timely. The stage leaves in an hour and, it will carry armed vigilantes eager for a go at those outlaws. If we get them, the miners will reward you. Sit and eat while I go make the arrangements."

He watched the friar drop wearily into a chair and voraciously attack the food, but his eyes were busy with the raw abrasions on Robusto's wrists. A queer look flashed across his face and his expression was studious as he left the house.

As he ate, Robusto also was studious. He was thinking of the one-third reward offered for the recovery of stolen loot and information leading to the punishment of the robbers. He was thinking too of retribution so richly deserved and fully earned by one Shelly Mandell.

Eating only enough to ease the gnawings of his empty belly, the friar soon gathered his cassock about him, left the saloonman's house and moved along the still unpeopled street. Far down toward the rental stable, he saw excitement reflected among the few men listening to John Random. And took advantage of the stir to mount a horse drowsing at a rack as it waited its drunken rider.

Moments later he was pelting along the cutoff road, down Grizzly Gulch.

⁂

THE toothless, tobacco-munching driver of the flat-bed wagon came alive with a start as the masked highwayman stepped from a thicket and confronted him with a leveled pistol.

"Stand and deliver, amigo," ordered the robber. "And save yourself harm."

The driver gulped. "You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Max. I'm headin' for Marysville to fetch in a load of wine for John Random. I got nothin' but two sacks of grain for my mules."

"And the gold clean-up of Jackass Bar," added the highwayman. "Set your brake and walk up the road to yonder bend. Then you can return and continue your trip for the wine."

"By grab!" The driver spat. "I'd give plenty to know who tipped you off. Anyhow, you sure better make yourself scarce around the diggings. I'd know you anywhere, in spite of that mask."

He bowlegged up the road and Robusto shouldered two canvas sacks, each containing close to a hundred pounds of dust, still in pokes and each bearing the name of its owner.

The driver's threat still rang in his ears, but he doubted the man's ability to identify him as he donned the wide girdle, pouched his guns and resumed his cassock. Until now the robe had proved a perfect mask. Those who had probed beneath it were dead. Yet the day must come when even that must fail him. And then . . . .

With his treasure sacks knotted and slung across the saddle, the friar led the

beast across the timbered hills, following deer trails, or no trails at all, until he topped the ridge and descended to the lonely cabin of Shelly Mandell. He approached with caution, but his pains were for naught. The place seemed deserted and the shack was as he had left it.

Having unloaded the gold and turned the animal loose to return to Jackass Bar, the friar lugged his treasure into the untidy cabin. One canvas bag he slipped into a half-filled gunny sack of spuds. The other he dropped into a box of flour. The padding of his sandals and the noise of his efforts woke a weak but persistent rapping inside the locked cubby.

Robusto lifted the bar and stood looking scornfully down at the man who crouched on his hands and knees. Shelly was begging: "Don't kill me, Sky-Boy. I really wasn't goin' to iron you, like I said. I'm always joshin' thataway, an' besides . . . . I was drunk."

"Your kind is always drunk," said Robusto tartly. "Drunk with greed. Drunk with lust and drunk with unholy power. Debauchery of life is your principle, in the employ of the devil. But for every debauch, there comes an hour of painful sobering. And this, my friend, is yours."

He lashed out and the renegade squealed like a a rat as the friar's powerful fingers sank into his flesh. Once again, Robusto secured that throat hold and again he flung his unconscious victim from him.

"This time," he growled, "you will be weak and sick when you awake. You will be content to await for your lawless companions who will never return. And when men drop in on you they will ask questions that you will not be able to answer. Adios, my friend, and *salud* to your brother—new owner of the riches you've traded the easier and worthless rewards of lawlessness."

He closed the door behind him and again took his way swiftly toward Jackass Bar.

JOHN RANDOM welcomed the friar in his Bonanza Saloon. "Where in the devil did you go? he asked. "I've had the whole town looking for you, ever since we brought in Sundown O'Malley's gang of road agents. That was a fine catch, Padre.

"My men followed your tip, and surprised Sundown as he stopped the stage. Two of the rascals died, and the rest will face the court tonight. Sundown confessed to being ringleader of the outlaws, and . . . ."

"Sundown is not the leader," said Robusto.

The president of the miner's court stared. "Come again, Padre. What do you know?"

"I have been running down the headquarters of these *diablos,*" said the friar. "And the leader is there now—with the pokes you shipped in the wagon."

"Where is he? Who—?"

"It's Shelly Mandell."

"No! You mean this gang has holed up at the Mandell claim? You mean Shelly robbed the shipment and is there with the gold now? If that's true, Padre, your worries about building the new wing on your mission are over."

"The gold is there," shrugged Robusto, noncommittally. "And Shelly guards it. A bad man and a desperate one, my friend."

John Random grinned, threw an arm about the friar's thick shoulders, hugged him enthusiastically. "You're all right, Padre," he applauded. "You've done more for us in a few hours than we have been able to do in that many months. Rest now and take it easy."

"I'll be here," promised the friar, and he was thinking about his triumphant return to San Gabriel.

He was smiling as he watched Random leave, then proceeded to eat an ample meal. He was finishing, almost an hour

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later, when the saloonman and his posse returned, outriding a prisoner.

Jackass Bar rejoiced that the reign of terror and lawlessness was ended. A public celebration flourished along the street, with miners flocking in from their placers. John Random introduced Friar Robusto and presented him with a third of the gold recovered in the Mandell cabin, likewise a mule on which to transport it.

They saw him off on his way to the south, nearly everybody marching alongside him to the borders of the camp.

Last to shake Robusto's hand was John Random. "Thanks for everything, Padre," he said heartily. "When you're in these parts again be sure to drop in. We can always be helped by a man whose acts speak louder than his sermons." His face darkened. "But you leave me with only one worry, Padre."

"And that?" asked Robusto.

"My girl," brooded the saloonman. "If I thought Wayne Mandell was mixed up in this highwayman business . . . ."

"Have no fear," said Robusto. "The only way he is concerned is that if you had not captured Shelly, your daughter would soon have become a widow."

Random brightened. "Thanks, my friend. I'm secure in your judgment. And I can promise you that Shelly Mandell will hang for his crimes."

And that was Robusto's last word in Jackass Bar.

LATE that afternoon, many miles from the placer camp, he was following a lonely trail when the swift beat of hoofs sounded behind him. A quick glance showed him a rider mercilessly flogging his horse.

Already well schooled in the lawlessness haunting Mother Lode trails, and jealously conscious of the temptation to highwaymen reposing in his saddlebags, the friar slapped his mule off the trail to graze, then he stepped into a thicket.

He emerged, bearing little resemblance to the man of God from the Mission San Gabriel. His face was hard, his hands close to the guns in his waistband as the lone rider came dashing up to curb his horse cruelly. It was Shelly Mandell.

"Where's that priest?" he barked. "Where'd that skunk with the brown nightgown go?"

"If I told you, man," said Robusto, stifling his curiosity as to how this outlaw came to be here, "what would you do?"

"Do?" Shelly's eyes blazed. "I'd kill him, that's what! That buzzard ain't no priest. He's a dirty robber who damn' near got me hung by framin' me with the robbery of dust from the Jackass Bar shipment. But I got a friend who slipped me a gun, and I busted loose. I'm killin' that skunk, then I'm puttin' a slug through that snaky stepbrother of mine. Where'd that priest go?"

"You're looking at him," said Robusto quietly.

Shelly's eyes bugged. "You?" Then as the force of the confession struck him, he drew his gun.

An acid smile wreathed the face of that strange man known as Friar Robusto, and he seemed to hesitate a long time. Then his hands moved. His guns flashed from his sash, leveled and spat their messengers of death. Shelly swayed crazily, tried to aim his piece. But as his strength quit him, he plunged from the saddle.

Robusto stood looking down at that shapeless huddle, blending with the red earth.

"Too low and mean to live," he murmured. "I trust *El Señor Dios* will forgive me for sending your lost soul to your master, the Devil."

He turned away, resumed his girdle and cassock and stirred his mule into motion.

Far to the south, the friars and lay brothers would be awaiting his return with impatience. Nor would they be disappointed. In his saddlebags reposed a fortune in gold—his reward for the clean-up of Jackass Bar. It was money that even straight-laced Father Manuel could take pride in. At least the acquiring of it rested lightly on the conscience of the monk who, though no monk at all, could walk among the godly men with his head erect and his eyes flashing a challenge to persecution and injustice.

THE END

LONGRIDER HEAVEN

His fists were balled, his eyes blazing as he sought to set his friend aright with the jeering citizens. . . .

By JAMES C. LYNCH

Big Red Halliday, outlaw, lay dead, and Granite Pass folks said it was damn' good riddance. They didn't know that a few simple, kindly words spoken by Red before he died, might reap a strange harvest of violence and bloodshed, through the man-for-man loyalty of a wizened outcast derelict.

THE cold, windowless cubbyhole in the rear of Bat Sever's Mile High Bar, was the only refuge that Moprags Regan had from a world that had used and wasted his once strong body.

It was midnight, and Moprags' long day was done.

From a pile in the corner of the cubby, he took a clean rag, placed it beside the ready bucket of water he would use to muck up with when another cold day dawned. Then, for a moment, he trembled rubbing his gnarled hands over the small flame of the stub candle on the box, listening to the friendless, eerie whine of the wind about the eaves.

Stripped down to his tattered underwear, he crawled shivering between his threadbare blankets on the hard cot and blew out the candle flame. He was exhausted. But even before sleep could claim him and ease the ache of loneliness, he heard the front door of the Mile High Bar crash open. Raucous shouting rocked the place and the floor shook to the ponderous tread of Bat Sever's three hundred pounds. The cubby door slammed in.

"Come out of that, you!" Bat Sever bellowed. "Git out here an' give me a hand. Here's a big crowd, an' Bottles is gone home."

Moprags lay still, his eyes closed, feigning sleep. How badly he needed the few hours of rest Bat allowed him! But Bat wouldn't be denied. He grabbed the cot emptied Moprags to the floor, picked up the pail and sluiced the icy water over him.

"Jump when I call yuh!" Bat snarled.

"Now get on your rags an' get to work." He slammed the door behind him.

Moprags freed himself from his sodden blankets, wriggled into his soaked clothes. When he let himself into the barroom, he gaped at the gathered crowd.

Sheriff Cephus Kline was there; with him at least a half-score gun-hung men. Moprags remembered the posse then. Kline had ridden out with this crew yesterday to follow the trail of stolen blooded stock that led from a man-made gap in a fenced pasture on Blaze Dickerson's BD Connected.

The returned posse was banked about a gaming table, all talking at once. Shivering with cold, Moprags moved over, stooped to peer under a man's arm. And what he saw made him sick.

He wiggled through, and stood looking down at the scarlet-thatched giant whom men had called Big Red Halliday. Red was dead, stretched out on the floor. Big Red Halliday, Moprags' last friend on earth.

There wasn't a man in Granite Pass but who had dubbed Red Halliday the worst outlaw yet unhung. Sheriff Kline had publicly branded Red a killer—but when Red wasn't there to make him prove it. Blaze Dickerson, boss of the BD Connected, had a standing offer of a hundred dollars, payable to the man who could catch Red in a crooked act.

But how could Red, the big, laughing brawling drifter, even do a mean or crooked act? For whenever he came back to Granite Pass, he always dropped in at Bat's place to ask for: ". . . my friend Tom Regan." Only then could Moprags once more stand up to the bar and drink like a man, and with one who held him as an equal. Big Red had done that. Now Big Red Halliday was dead . . .

There was a lot of talk, but Moprags didn't hear it. After his fingers plucked at Sheriff Kline's fleece-lined coat, he stared up into the dour, gloomy face of the lawman.

"Him?" he croaked. "Big Red done the rustlin'?"

"Who else?" the sheriff said, harshly, not deigning to look down. "Who else does anything around here? Only gripe I got is that we couldn't catch him with the cattle. When we lost the trail of Dickerson's critters, I split the posse and turned back, each of us takin' a different way. I come on Halliday layin' beside his pony. He'd been shot in the back—probably had a fallin' out with some of his own hellions. I fetched him in. But he stole Blaze Dickerson's critters—you can be sure of that!"

* * *

IT WASN'T until Moprags started to thank the lawman for his long explanation that he realized that Kline hadn't noticed him at all. He'd been talking to Bat Sever all the time over Moprags' head. For now Kline's heavy hand came down, slapping Moprags' grip from his coat.

"Let go of me, you loused-up ol' has-been," he barked. "Fetch me a bottle, an' keep out of my way."

Bat frowned at him, "Jump, damn you!" he snarled. "Get some likker into these boys." Then Bat turned to the lawman. "Now, thanks to you, we'll have a little peace around here. Reckon we might as well wake up Doc an' have the inquest right here, eh?"

And Moprags grew a little sicker at the thought of Red's death—of his body being here, as a spectacle, just to sell a few extra drinks.

"Might as well get it over with," agreed the sheriff. "Send Moprags over to route Doc Smith out of bed."

Moprags brought a tray of bottles and glasses to the table, then let himself out into the cold and bitter night. The cut of the wind through his wet clothes was as nothing compared to the pain he felt inside. Once he, himself, had been a man like Red Halliday, laughing and loving life, unable to stay in one place long.

Tough Tom Regan, men had called him then. Tough Tom, who had pointed the greatest of Texas herds up the Chisholm trail. Tough Tom—who had hired tough crews—men like Red—because it took tough men to keep his pace.

But now all that was gone, lost in the limbo of forgotten things. Those old-timers were dead. All that was left for Tom Regan was swamping in the Mile High Bar. It had been Bat Sever who dubbed him Moprags, the first day he

had put him on. That name seemed to have robbed Tom of the last shred of men's respect.

And Moprags had to endure it, for there was no other way for him to earn a living. But though he lived, after a fashion, he envied those old friends who had passed on before him. Often wondering when he, too, would get the call to ride the dark trail over the Shadow Range . . . And listening for it.

By the time Doc Smith answered his timid knock, Moprags' teeth were chattering so he could hardly deliver his message. And when he got back to the Mile High Bar again, there was no rest, for his tired and aching body.

Fetch bottle and glasses, wash dirty tumblers and dry them again. Swab the bar. Always on the go. While a gathering crowd celebrated the death of Big Red Halliday—the man who, Moprags was certain, had taken nothing from the biggest of them. There had been a man who had laughed at them all, had offered to fight them one at a time, or all together. The only man in Granite Pass who had called Moprags "my friend, Tom Regan."

Doc Smith, after swearing in a coroner's jury, had Sheriff Kline repeat his story. The jury hunched in a corner, deliberating until the bottle Bat furnished was empty. Then they came back with their verdict.

"Death by person or persons unknown —an' damn good riddance!" pronounced the foreman.

The black-coated undertaker came, held a whispered conference with Bat Sever, and announced that Big Red would lie in state in the Mile High Bar—an object lesson for those who might consider following in his steps.

That night, Moprags never got to bed. Morning came, cold and leaden, and the news spread. A steady stream of men came in to drink and have a look at the big red-head who had come at last to his predicted end. Moprags heard them talk aloud of things they wouldn't have even dared think about, had Red been alive and kicking.

Every crime in the territory was recalled—and the blame for it fixed on the dead man. Listening, Moprags felt a growing kinship to that figure of cold clay and something began to bubble and seeth inside him. But he kept busy, and quiet, his unrest growing inside him because he swallowed it. And all the while, Bat was profiting from the gruesome spectacle as the mob celebrated by depleting the supply of Bat's bottles—and paying in cash.

Will Acorn, the cattle buyer, drank a toast over Red's body and allowed Red had been the hellion who had stampeded one of his herds and cost a group of small cowmen a cool thousand dollars. At ten o'clock, Blaze Dickerson came in with his entire BD Connected crew. Dickerson bought a drink for the house and toasted: "I'm lookin' for more prosperous times ahead, from here out."

Not until pockets were running empty, did the undertaker come with the hearse to take Red to the newly dug grave upon the hill. The whole town turned out, and Moprags stumbled along at the tag end of the procession, his tousy head bowed in grief.

When the crowd gathered about the grave, Moprags stood beside the shallow hole.

They lowered the box slowly into the ground, and the Reverend Phineas Blythe moved to the head of the grave. Looking more sombre and cadaverous than ever, standing there beneath the leaden sky, he thumbed the pages of the Book, stared at the crowd, then snapped his Bible shut, as if what he read there was far too good for the occasion.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," he intoned. "He who lives by the gun, will thus die. Amen!"

He stepped back. Two men lifted shovels, and the crowd began to edge away. Then something boiled over in Moprags. This wasn't right. It wasn't proper for a man—no matter who—to be buried in the ground without a single kind word said over him. That wasn't in Moprags' code; never would be. . . .

Maybe Red was an outlaw. What of it? He'd been Moprags' only friend. And a gent just couldn't let a friend get buried thisaway, not without some eulogy for Red to take along, some word to show the folks Up There. How could a man get on up there in the Shadow Range without sort of a recommend to help him prove his case?

MOPRAGS found himself standing where Phineas Blythe had stood. His hands were upflung, his head tipped back, the bitter wind whipping his clothes and unkempt hair.

"Hear me, you hate-filled folks!" he shouted. "Hear me out. There ain't a man amongst you—from the littlest runt to big Bat Sever himself, who'd have dared to of spoke the things you've said today, if Red had been alive. You've blamed him for robbin' the Granite Pass-Mountain City Stage. You've blamed him for rustlin', killin' an' stampeding herds of cattle. You've pinned every crime in the book on Big Red, because he was big enough to keep his business to himself, and mebbe feel pity for your jealous, mistrustin' souls."

He paused, glared around. "You never could prove a thing about Red. Last night our sheriff said Red had rustled Blaze Dickerson's cows. That's a wild guess. The coroner's jury said he'd been killed by, person or persons unknown. Mebbyso. And our preacher says him who lives by the gun'll some day die by one. Mebbyso again—it happens a lot thataway. But you're all liars. Damn liars . . . ! You hear me?"

His fists were balled now, his eyes blazing. And he groped desperately for some way to set Big Red right with them. Where the inspiration came from, he didn't know. It was pouring out of him before he realized, words which he hoped, as a lucky shot in the darkness of his grief and desperation, might hit the bull's-eye.

"Now I'll tell you the truth about Big Red. He was a better man than any of you. You get robbed, and you do nothing about it. But my good friend Red, he was doing it for you. He's been ridin' the hills, trying to find out who it was breakin' the law around here. An' he found out. He snuck into town an' told me, night before last. He even knew before-hand that Blaze Dickerson's cattle were to be raided, and Red rode out himself to put the deadwood on the crooks. When that was done, he was gonna name the under-cover boss. But can't now. Somebody shot him in the back—an' I think I know who. So I'm takin' up where Red left off."

Moprags paused, gulped, and then played his hole-card—a more desperate play than he'd ever made in all his risky life. "Come five o'clock tonight, I'm namin' the snake who's all you think Red Halliday to be!"

With that much off his chest, reason returned to Moprags. He shook with fear. He was taking a long gamble; he was baiting with his own body—worn out, but still with the desire for life burning strong within it—the trap to catch Red's killer, and the snakes who'd blot Red's name. When he spoke again, his voice had gained confidence.

"Reason I'm givin' the snake till five o'clock, is to give him a chance to run, so you all can all recognize a yeller-bellied rabbit. If he don't run, he'll answer to me. An' now . . ." He stared down at the nailed pine box, "Red, old son, mercy on your soul—an' mine. Amen."

No one said a word, no one made a move save to open a lane and let him through. But once free of the crowd, it took all Moprags had to keep from breaking into blind flight. He was a fool . . . a doddering old fool! What chance had he to live, if his plan worked? But when five o'clock came, the law and Granite Pass would demand him to speak. Speaking, he would die. And he—Moprags, the broken-down swamper who had—only a few hours before, no great desire to live—found within himself a burning necessity to keep on living; to justify a friend, and a friend's faith in him. It was a lot of work for him to do . . . If he only had the courage!

Alone, he walked until he was beside the creek, where a high bank and a clump of trees broke the frigid wind, he built a little fire, hunkered down beside the flame.

• • •

LIKE all men who have ridden far-flung trails, Moprags stared silently into the fire's white heart. Always he had drawn strength from the mystery he sensed there. And it didn't fail him now. For suddenly the curling flame let him in on something he hadn't realized, ever before. It told him that life, friendship, like a fire beside the trail, is a

fleeting thing—made to warm man's flesh and blood. To die out when it's task was done.

Moprags knew then that what he had done today was because of the fire of friendship that Big Red had kindled in him. Now maybe he'd turn to ash when Red most needed the warmth of his regard. A shudder passed down Moprags' wasted body, and drawn by something beyond his ken, he looked up at the leaden sky.

It seemed to him that ghostly legions galloped there. Men who'd ridden at his stirrup of a storm-swept night, while thousands of wild and maddened long-horned cattle had tried to run them down in the stampede. Men who had backed him in the face of smoking guns and sudden death. Tough, rollicking men—like Big Red. He heard the pound of their hoof-beats, roaring in, as if to lend their help, their loops full and their guns out, the light of battle blazing in their eyes.

The swamper whom the Mile High customers called Moprags trudged back to the saloon; made his way to his cubby, and fumbled into his warbag. He drew forth a wide belt and a pair of holsters freighted with ancient guns. The weapons were rusted, the leather dry and cracked.

He lifted a gun. It pulled awkwardly from the torn holster. The weapons and leather needed care and work—and neither were any good without shells to fill the empty loops. How could he overcome these things? And if he did, what would be the ultimate answer. What if he stood on the street at five o'clock, and nothing happened—if Red's killer played it cagey and didn't come out? Even his swamper job would be done—and he would be done with it.

The well-nigh deserted barroom, paying no heed to Bottles' crude jest. Bat Severs was not there. The townsmen who coursed the walks eyed him curiously, without speaking.

Embarrassed and frightened, he edged along and into Bert Holmes' Mercantile. There he stood before the merchant with downcast eyes. "Bert," he said hesitantly, "I—I reckon I'll have to kill a man tonight. I was wondering if you'd—if you'd make me the loan of a few shells, till payday."

He waited for Bert Holmes to laugh. The whole town knew he never saw a payday. And he almost jumped when a new box of .45's plunked onto the counter.

"Glad to oblige you, Moprags," Bert said heartily. "An' by the way, I got a heavy coat back there. It's too small for me; sort of shrunk up. Hate to throw it away, 'cause it's most brand new. You take it, if you like."

Moprags' eyes were too full to notice that it was indeed a brand new coat that Bert took from the rack—as were the heavy mittens the merchant gave him to keep his hands from getting stiff. He mumbled his thanks, and Bert Holmes walked with him to the door.

Not until he was outside, did Moprags realize Bert had said: "Bat Sever come in here, on his way back from the funeral. He bought a fresh box of shells. I thought you ought to know."

Moprags thought about that all the way to Sam Taylor's gun-shop. Sam, always scowling and dour when he had come into Bat's for a drink, beamed on Moprags now as he looked over the rusted old weapons.

"*Hm-m-m.* These guns need a lot more than oil, Tom. I'll just work 'em over a little, make 'em pull a little easier."

He dissembled the guns with deft fingers, cleaned cylinders and barrels, scraped rust from the working parts, worked a little with a file, then put the weapons together. When Moprags picked them up, he realized they had never worked so well before.

When he was leaving, Sam Taylor said: "Will Acorn came in on his way back from the cemetery. He had me file down the trigger dog of his gun. First time I ever knew he packed one. Carries it under his left arm, in a Texas holster."

Shaken by these bits of information, Moprags took himself to Trampas' saddle shop. Bat Sever . . . Will Acorn! That pair could mean anything. Any man had a right to buy a box of cartridges or get a trigger-dog filed to suit. But on this day . . . Trampas, the saddle maker, worked a half hour on Moprags' gear. He stitched the holsters and kneaded oil into the leather until it was soft and pliable. And while he worked he talked.

"Blaze Dickerson stopped in here on the way back from Red's buryin'. He had me cut some leather away from his holster lip. I've only fixed a couple of holsters like that in my life. Both times it was for gents who figgered on some fast killin', an' wanted all the edge they could get."

* * *

ON THE street at last, Moprags was confused. Blaze Dickerson, of the three who had bought or repaired the tools of death this day, was far and away the most dangerous. A close-mouthed, catlike man, Blaze was jealous of his range, proud of his power and position, inclined to ride rough-shod over lesser men. . . .

Slowly, Moprags trod up one board walk, and down the other. There seemed nothing else to do; no place to go. Once Blaze Dickerson came to the front porch of the Granite Pass House, frowning at Moprags before turning back inside. The new raw scar on his holster-lip showed plainly, and Moprags winced a little when he met the man's hot stare.

Not for some time did Moprags realize something was amiss. The BD Connected cowboys had disappeared, their ponies gone from the rack. A pang of warning shot through him, and he made another turn of the street, searching for hidden vantage points hoping that the man he had sworn to name would give himself away. But he saw nothing.

He knew it was nearing five o'clock when saloon porches began to fill and men took places of vantage along the walk. And he felt the moment was at hand when the crowd on the veranda of the Granite Pass House moved aside, and Blaze Dickerson strode out to stand belligerently on the top step.

The cowman's right hand was ungloved, his thumb hooked in his belt, his long fingers tapping lightly on the freshly cut leather of his low-cut holster.

In an agony of suspense, Moprags moved to the center of the street, looked around. He knew every man in town by sight. They were all accounted for by now; crowded into the scope of his vision. All but two—Bat Sever and Will Acorn.

Then Moprags' heart leaped. It didn't seem possible that those two . . . No, it couldn't be! Bat and Acorn were no doubt standing at Bat's bar, ignoring the whole thing.

But Blaze Dickerson still stood there, arrogant and tough, waiting . . .

Moprags shook himself together. Maybe it was Blaze Dickerson owner of vast herds, also owner of a crooked streak and of a guilty conscience.

There was only one way to find out about Blaze.

Very slowly, Moprags shuffled along the street, pausing before the Granite Pass House. He turned to face the cattleman. For a long time, the two looked at one another, Blaze tense and ready.

Moprags finally found his voice. "You know what time it is, Blaze?" he asked.

Dickerson's left hand went under his coat, lifted a big silver watch. His narrowed eyes flicked down at the time piece, then back to Moprags.

"Five o'clock, Tom," he clipped. "Right on the dot. You can turn and put your back to me, pardner, when you make your talk. I'll see that no man gets you from behind!"

The tension went out of Moprags like wind from an exploded paper sack. That wasn't Blaze Dickerson talking—not the one Moprags thought he knew! The man who had made that speech was a man driven by almost as much desperation as Moprags himself; eager for the showdown that would see an end to his cattle losses.

Chaos twisted and whirled in Moprags' mind as he turned his back to Blaze and faced the staring town. A minute ticked away. Someone, his patience at an end, cried out.

"Five o'clock, Moprags! Come on, feller! Speak up!"

Moprags swallowed, turned away from the speakers. Suddenly down the crowd echoed a guffaw of belly laughs.

"Speak what?" shouted someone. "Another sermon for yore friend, Red? Hell, he ain't gonna say a thing. He knows damn' well Red was what we said he was—a sneakin' crook!"

"You're a liar!" bawled Moprags, in desperation. "I'm gonna name the snake that's takin' you in. It was—was—"

His voice broke pitifully as he groped blindly for a name. Wouldn't the coyote have guts enough to show himself? Bat Sever and Will Acorn trembled on his lips. Neither were on the street . . .

"It was . . ." Moprags looked up toward the skies, but even the spirits of those old friends couldn't help a man lie.

Abruptly he saw the quick wink of muzzle flame, from a slit in the bell tower of the court house a hundred yards away. A bullet slashed Moprags' leg, knocking it out from under him.

Men pressed back along the walks, staring wildly, looking for the man who had fired that shot.

Blaze Dickerson came leaping down to stand over Moprags, shouting. "Who was it, Tom?"

Moprags flopped over, threw a bitter look at the cattleman, and drew his gun. He knew now he had the answer to Dickerson's missing men. He raised his weapon, aimed the muzzle toward the bell-tower slot and loosed two shots.

The first slug rang the court house bell. The second wrung a long, high scream from a human throat. A rifle showed at the sill of the bell-tower opening, then came clattering down upon the street. And seconds later, the muted crash of a falling body told Granite Pass that a man had tumbled from his high perch to the floor below.

Blaze Dickerson scooped Moprags up into his arms, and ran with the rest of the aroused townsmen. And in spite of his burden, Blaze was one of the first who charged into the court house hall to stare down at the broken body lying there

"Sheriff Cephus Kline!" he gasped.

Moprags stared up at the twisted unbelieving features of the cowman who held him in his arms. But before he could speak to Dickerson, a roar of hoofs and a high yell pulled them to the street again. The BD Connected crew was there.

"You was right, boss!" barked their foreman. "We got 'em both!"

"Both?" echoed Dickerson weakly.

"Bat Sever and Will Acorn," said the ramrod triumphantly. "They came sneakin' up the Pass, like you figgered they might. Bat tried to fight it out, an' we had to fill him full of lead. Acorn caved an' we strung him up. He admitted most of the rustlin'. An' he had the loot from that last stage job in his saddlebags!"

Moprags found himself slipping, but there was something he had to say. "Now, damn you," he muttered, "will you believe a man? Big Red was—was—"

● ● ●

TOM REGAN, called Moprags, tried vainly to tell them some more about Big Red. But the next he knew he was lying on his back, staring at the sky from the bed of a jolting wagon. Blaze Dickerson hunkered over him, a ready whiskey bottle in his hand.

The oldster took a pull, looked hard at the cowman. "Where we goin'?" he wanted to know. "Where you takin' me?"

"To my place," said Blaze. "You're workin' for me, at top wages, as long as you want to stay." His brow furrowed. "Time and again, that damn red-head hit me up for a job. But there was so much talk flyin' around, I wouldn't take a chance on him. I can't help Red now, so you got to let me make it up to you."

Tom Regan stared up at the leaden sky. There they were again, that ghostly cavalcade of old friends. And Red was with them now, that go-to-hell smile showing his white teeth. All of them had their reins lifted, ready to go. Moprags waved his hand. They seemed to fling up theirs in turn, answering his salute. Then they were rolling their spurs and winged ponies were in motion.

Flying over the Shadow Range, Big Red was outridden by the rest who were showing him the easy way, because he had come to them with a recommend from a good friend.

"Sure, I'll take it, Blaze," Moprags heard himself say, before he went to sleep. "I'll be mighty proud to work for a gent who sided me in a tight. An' you won't regret your choice. Someday after we've both crossed the Big Divide, I'll let you meet some fellers you'll be proud to know. Fine boys . . . like Big Red Halliday!"

"Us Palidays Don't

A Great Cow-Country Novel

By DEE LINFORD

Holding the dying man against him, he returned the gunners' fire. . . .

When old Backfire Paliday sloped into that high-strung barbwire at night, then had to be planted in two separate pieces, it was certainly cause enough for his cowman sons to go to war. But real pay-off came when a gun-hung squatter presented the boys with a bill for those same twisted wire strands which were still stained with their dad's life-blood!

CHAPTER ONE

The Fighting Palidays

OLD BACKFIRE PALIDAY was something of a prophet, they said. That spring, when squatters' barbwire first appeared on the Big Piney meadows, Backfire allowed that death in a

DIE!"

dozen forms wouldn't be far behind the postholes. And sure enough, it wasn't a week until the old man himself lay dead up in the Piney Hills, where he'd gone to scout his cow-range for summer water.

The old man's five sons were down on Big Piney Creek, winding up spring roundup when they got word of Backfire's death. Brule, the eldest of the clan, saddled his mouse-colored gelding and rode into the Piney Hills to check up. The remaining four brothers stayed behind to drag the rest of their winter-weakened cattle onto their feet and haze them from the wet gullies onto grass. At dark they rode for Big Piney town to meet Brule.

Each of the four Paliday sons roped a fresh horse from the rough string for the ride, and every horse was blown and dead-footed when Big Piney's dim red lights came into view. . . .

When word of Backfire's death arrived in Big Piney over the tomato can telegraph, Marshal Chet Sombers set down his drink on the counter of Paddlefoot Renfro's Cowman's Bar. "Now ain't that hell?" he growled, gazing glumly out at the high-wheeled squatters' wagons that choked the street. "Never seen it fail. Cowman jus' gits his feet under him an' thinks he kin see his way out, then a winter like the last 'un comes hellin' along to kill all the calves an' she-stuff. Come spring, he ain't got critters enough to stock his old range, so the squatters an' sheepers move in, the same as buzzards'll wheel in to pick the beef-bones when the drifts melt. By grab, if it's come to where we got to turn the Piney country over to the squatters or give it back to the Injuns, I say give 'er back!

Paddlefoot Renfro wiped the perspiration from his hairless head with the hem of his bar apron, and his mud-brown eyes looked sad. "Paliday's Campstool outfit was the only one that stood a chance to weather it through," the barman mourned. "An' the Campstool mighta carried some o' the others. Now ole Backfire is daid, an' hell'll be to pay when them boys o' his'n gits wind of it!"

In that, Paddlefoot also proved something of a prophet. For it was in Paddlefoot's bar that Brule Paliday later rendered his report to his brothers, and the saloonman could smell gunsmoke right on Brule's breath. . . .

A SWARTHY, black-eyed giant with slight stoop to his shoulders, Brule slouched against the cherrywood bar, nursing his drink with his left hand, his right thumb hooked in his sagging bullet-belt.

"We-all heah'd right about pa," Brule told his listening brothers in the slow drawl he'd picked up years before down the trail. "Pa's daid. An' we heah'd right about the bawbware. She's strung aroun' up there like popcawn on a Chris'mas tree. But pa must not of heard of it bein' just where she was, 'cause he rode plumb into it at night on the lope. Pa's hawse was all tangled up in them shawp, tearin' bawbs when I come up. I finished her misery. An' Pa—wal, Pa was all tangled up, too. But he didn't need his misery ended. . . ."

Brule Paliday stared hard at his drink. "Theah wa'n't no haid on Pa's shoulders," he added slowly.

A low, vibrant oath came from the other four remaining Palidays. Ren Paliday slapped the bar with his open hand. "The dirt-diggin' squatter sons!"

Ren Paliday was the second oldest in the clan. The shortest, heaviest, and he had the hottest head. His wide, slightly bulged brown eyes harbored cold lights that weren't often there. His drooping brown mustache quivered a little as he waited for Brule to say more.

"They fenced in Barrel Springs?" Lin Paliday asked.

"Yeah," Lon echoed. "What about the springs?"

Lin and Lon, second youngest members of the tribe, were twins; and one always spoke when the other did. This was regarded as their right within the family, and Brule had waited for Lon to repeat the question before trying to answer it.

"I didn't ride up to the Springs. I aimed to, but I couldn't see my way clear to. Not with pa a-hangin' theah. I cut 'im loose an' fetched him down on my saddle."

The twins heard his words and turned to consult one another's eyes, looking as much alike as two brass-jacketed slugs from the same mould. An inch taller than Ren, but not so tall as Brule, they were high strung and impatient like their father, whom they resembled more closely than any of their brothers. Their eyes took the same squint as they searched each other's face, and there was the same tight draw about their mouths as they turned back to Brule.

"Bu-but what about pa's h-head?"

This was Benny's question, and Benny always stuttered just a little when he was excited or put out. Usually the other Palidays joshed Benny about his stammer, and tried to hooraw him out of it, but they didn't josh him now.

"I brung it in, Benny," Brule said gently, "wrapped in my slicker. An' I buried

pa, all of him, soon as I got to town. He'd been daid for quite a spell, I reckon."

Benny Paliday had just turned twenty the week before, and only since that time had he been accepted by his brothers as an equal. Grief and rage were choking him now, but he turned his head so that his brothers might not see the hot tears that scalded his eyes.

Benny understood what the name of Paliday stood for along the Piney creeks. There was a saying there that four Palidays made a dozen—a hell of a big dozen, they said—when trouble was the freight. The leanest of the four was a good ax-handle broad through the shoulders, and Ren, the shortest of them, stood a long six-foot in his stocking feet. Any one of them could tear a deck of cards in two with his gloves on, or knock the eye out of coyote or man at fifty yards with a rifle. And there wasn't one of them that wouldn't fight at the drop of a hat; fight anything, the saying went, that could stand up on its hind legs to kick back.

ALL this Benny had heard of his brothers, from tongues that had no call to make the facts any larger or any smaller than they were. And this was Benny's first trip into town as one of them. It was a prideful thing, and Benny was too old now to cry. So he hid his tears for his dead father, and he didn't see the eyes of his brothers soften as they looked at him.

Benny was the favorite with all of the Palidays. Perhaps it was because he was the baby of the outfit. Or maybe it was because there was more of their mother in him than in any of the others. His slanted blue eyes might have been his mother's own, especially when they were laughing.

All the Palidays remembered and revered their dead mother. . . .

Ren slapped the bar again, and spoke the words that burned on every one of their tongues. "Well, what the hell? We can't stand for no barbwire in the Piney Hills. That's been our summer range ever since Pa drove his Oregon bulls in here. An' it's a double-rigged cinch we've got to have summer range, if the Campstool is goin' to stay in business. Anyhow, them squatters killed pa. Killed 'im same as if they'd gunned 'im down from behin'. We ain't a-goin' to pass it up."

"I don't aim we should," Brule commented, still in his slow drawl. Brule was the level-headedest one of the clan, and therefore the most dangerous. "All I say is we better look behin' us, afore we set. Theah's angles to it I don't like. Fences I saw up theah are cockeyed, for one thing. Only two strands o' wire on the posts, an' them high up. They'd stop a cow, mebbe, but not a calf. An' the squatters I seen ain't right neither, somehow. They all have a funny, too-smart look about 'em."

Paddlefoot Renfro had stood wall-eyed behind his bar up till now, listening to the talk with a wide, vacant look. But he came forward now, and with the barest nod of his shiny head he signaled Brule's attention toward the other end of the bar. Paddlefoot had tact.

But Brule needed no such signal. He was looking into the bar mirror, and he'd already seen the man down the room. He had stopped talking because of him.

The other Palidays saw the stranger then, too. He stood alone at the far end of the bar, and Benny wondered howcome the man was there. He hadn't been, a moment before.

Benny's first impulse was to laugh outright at the stranger's ludicrous appearance. Small and wizened, the newcomer wore an immense, wide-brimmed hat that rode his ears and made his pinched face look smaller than ever. Topping this off were the faded bib-overalls of a homesteader, and the high-heeled boots of a cowman.

The first impression *was* funny, but Benny didn't laugh. For Benny found himself looking into as dead and lifeless a pair of eyes as he'd ever seen. Benny noticed also that the stranger wore guns, in worn, low-slung holsters, and that his dry claw-hands were thumbed into the side openings of his overalls, his fingers almost touching the wooden gun-grips.

"Howdy, gents!" The stranger's voice came as cold and as brittle as his eyes. "H'ist yer drinks, an' let's talk bizness."

"Wal, wal." It was Brule who spoke. "What business we-all got with you?"

"Ye'll learn. Ye'll learn," the stranger said. "Git on with yer drinks."

THE silence that came into the barroom then was unnatural and charged with electricity, like the single beat of dead stillness that follows close-striking lightning before the thunder.

Brule Paliday broke it, his voice soft and drawling still. Too soft, Benny thought, and the drawl too slow.

"We-all ain't never been in the habit o' bein' told when to drink, stranger. An' if you got somethin' a-botherin' your mind, yuh better spill it, 'fore somebuddy spills it for yuh."

The hard-eyed stranger showed his teeth in what might have been meant for a smile. It looked more like a snarl. "Yer own way, gentle-men. Yer own way. I only heard ye say that the gent which rode into the fence in the Piney Hills was yer pappy. That makes you li'ble, I reckon. Li'ble for damages."

"Li'ble?" All five Palidays repeated the word.

"Yeah." The lifeless gray eyes seemed to grow colder. "Two panels o' that fence was torn down, an' fences cost money in this here country. Ye see, gentlemen, that there was *my* fence!"

Again the unliving silence came into the room, and for a prolonged moment no man moved, and no man spoke. The incredible gall of the squatter seemed to paralyze the brothers. This man not only admitted it was his fence that trapped and decapitated Backfire Paliday. But—he asked for damages! *He asked for trouble!*

Paddlefoot Renfro moved first, backing slowly toward the shelter of his iron-box safe, ready to duck. The Palidays stood stiffly, watching the diminutive man out of eyes that had grown quiet and very bright. That is all the Palidays but Benny.

Benny had just had his first drink of real bar likker, and the whiskey and the bite of his grief united to send red liquid fire cruising through his veins. He stood nearest the hard-eyed stranger, and turned to face him squarely.

"Steady now. I'll handle it!" Brule's hoarse whisper came down the bar, and the others heeded. They stood quiet in their boots, hands flat on the bar-top. But Benny didn't even hear the whispered command. One of his hands grasped the edge of the bar until the cords stood out white on his wrist. His other hovered just above his gun. His lips twisted into a snarl, and in his voice was all his hate for squatters and all his grief over his father's death.

"You d-dirty, crawlin' polecat. *I'll* pay yuh for your fence. In l-lead!"

Benny saw the stranger's skinny claw-hands flash toward his guns in a movement so fast that it was blurred to the eye. Benny grabbed for his own gun. Then something struck him in the back of the neck, hurling him to the floor. Gun-thunder crashed above him, thunder that was streaked with smoke-blue flame and hissing lead.

It stopped abruptly as Benny rolled over and found his feet. He came up slowly, shaking his head to clear it. Then he saw the stranger, sprawled face down on the floor. Blood welled from under the man and spread in a scarlet pool on the rough pine boards, where the stranger's worn boots beat a dying tattoo.

Turning, Benny saw Brule, and the youth's breath caught in his throat. The elder Paliday was standing apart from his brothers at the bar. He stood with feet planted wide, and a smoking gun in his hand. He swayed on his heels as he tried desperately to keep standing, and two red blotches dripped from his shirt. Brule's face was clouded with anger as he looked at Benny, and his dimming black eyes accused the youth.

"Why didn't you let me handle it, like I said, yuh block-headed jingle-bob," Brule scolded, his eyes glazing fast. "If you can't hold yore likker better'n that, yuh better not drink."

Brule Paliday didn't say any more, because his legs gave way, and he folded to the floor before any of his brothers could reach him to keep him up. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Fingers Estes Collects in Blood

THE four remaining Palidays were standing in a broken circle around their dead brother when the bar's two swing-doors flapped inward to admit Chet Sombers. The old lawman stood just where the batwing doors met, a leveled shotgun in his hands.

"What in hell's goin' on in here?" the

marshal blustered, his drooping gray mustach twitching on his lip as he framed his words. "You Palidays ride into town, an' you think the place is all took up. Wal, I'm here to tell yuh—God's sake! *Brule!*"

The lawman's eyes bulged as he looked at the elder Paliday, then narrowed at the man on the floor down the room. He walked to the squatter and turned him over with his foot. There he bent over to peer into the dead man's face, and he straightened, with a sort of coughing gasp.

"Who's this feller?"

Paddlefoot Renfro stirred his ponderous hulk from behind the safe and spoke for the first time since the shooting. "Homesteader. From the Piney Hills."

"Homsteader, hell!" the lawman objected. "Homesteaders don't wear boots like that. An' look at his hands. Fine an' soft as my wife's, if I had one. Hardest work he ever done was to drag that gun."

Paddlefoot advanced another step. "All I know," he argued defensively, "is that a bunch of other nesters brung him here a piece back. Said he was drunk, an' could they stow 'im in my back room till he sobered up? I told 'em o' course they could. I wouldn't have no squatter-bums a-drinkin' at my bar an' clutterin' up the place. But a drunk man, well, that's different. An' he was in bad shape."

"He wa'n't drunk when I saw 'im standin' back there," Ren Paliday said, his brown eyes wide once more. "He was sober as I was. An' set to kill."

Ren wasn't much of a hand to talk, but he was the oldest of the brothers now, and was therefore their spokesman. The others stood silent, recognizing his right.

"Shet up," the old marshal commanded bluntly, staring at the pinched dead face, his own features tense with thought. "I've seen that face somewheres. I'll have 'er in a minute. It's—nope. It's . . . God's sake! Shore it is. Huh! Gents, that shore *ain't* no homesteader! All the ground he ever craved was a six-foot acre on boot hill, when this here thing happened. That there is Fingers Estes, smoothest gunslick in Wyomin', an' the highest-paid killer on the Platte. I knew where I'd saw him, quick as I looked at 'im. Johnson County, durin' the cowman's raid up there in 'Ninety-two. Cowmen imported Fingers from Texas to work the grangers. Fingers got fifty dollars a day, an' five hundred for every granger scalp he showed."

"Well," Ren growled, "what the hell? What he jumpin' us for?"

Chet Sombers wagged his head. "You tell me. I can't see no further up his trail than you can. But he wasn't drunk, an' you can put that in yore pipe an' smoke it. No, sir! Fingers Estes didn't drink. Not never. He must of acted lit to git inside that back room, an' lay for you boys. *Huh!*"

THE marshal had been running his fingers through the dead gunner's pockets as he talked, and he straightened now, holding a bit of yellow-green paper to the light. Benny walked over to look, and saw half a five-hundred dollar bill. The bill itself was old and worn, but the tear was fresh along one side.

"An' whoever he was workin' for tonight," the marshal went on, staring at the torn bill, "he still was drawin' top hand's wage."

"Top hand's wage?" Ren Paliday repeated. Ren's eyes were wide and inquiring.

"Five hundred dollars ain't no crumbs, mister," the lawman opined. "Not even for a Paliday scalp. This here bill was tore in two, an' not very long back. Whoever did the tearin' aimed to give Fingers the rest of it, I reckon, when this job was did. But I reckon now Fingers has collected his last murder-money. Yep—in blood!"

Ren Paliday whirled to Paddlefoot Renfro, his wide face was flushed. "Who you say snaked that sidewinder in here?"

The barman sloshed a glass full of whiskey with an unsteady hand, and gulped it.

Dee Linford, author of this novelette, knows his West and the men and women who tamed it. We believe that you'll remember the colorful portrait of the last of the Fighting Palidays for a long time to come! Watch for more of this author's thrilling stories soon to be published in this magazine! Next issue on sale April 1st!

"Told you they was just a pack o' squatters," he said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "Wasn't a man among 'em looked to have even half a bill that size to his name."

Ren turned back to his three remaining brothers. Into his eyes came the quiet, bright look that Benny had seen there only rarely before.

"Reckon us Palidays better mosey." Here was something Ren knew about, something he had words to express. "Brule will wait for us here, I reckon."

Still speaking, Ren started for the door. But the marshal's voice stopped him in the middle of his first choppy step.

"Stay right where yuh are, Ren. There's been killin' enough in my town for one night. I give you boys cowman's law up here, straight. An' that oughta be good enough to suit yuh. Now pull in yore damn' horns an' let the law take its course; or I'll swear in every able bodied man in town an' knock 'em off.

"Course now," the marshal added, relenting, "If the law can't crack the case, wal, I reckon this here is still Big Piney an' you'll be in yore rights to branch out some an' prosecute the case yoreselves, sort of. Meantime," the lawman crossed over to the swing doors and pulled one of them open, "we can't let these boys lay here all night. I'll send the Poage boys for 'em in my buckboard, an' we'll lay 'em over at the office. Inquest tomorra noon, an' we'll plant 'em, proper, after. Now—*What in hell!*"

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THE marshal's bony finger was jabbing at a brown piece of wrapping-store paper on the outside of the door he was holding open, pulled in toward him. The paper was stuck to the wood with a postage stamp, and there was a crude pencil scrawl on it.

The law signaled Paddlefoot for the lamp, so's he could read it, and the Palidays followed the lamp. It said:

> Five little Palidays had cattle ground galore.
> They held it with a sixgun. Now there are four.

The note was unsigned; the poet anonymous. The Palidays read it again, and their eyes hardened. The marshal cursed softly.

"This here thing looks bigger now than it did," Chet Sombers said aloud. "That paper wasn't there when I come in here. Shows, I reckon, that Fingers *wasn't* workin' alone. Shows somebody watched the killin' from the outside, an' stuck that pome there, after."

The marshal threw a glance out the door into the black night, and stepped prudently to one side of the lighted opening. "Boys," he said then, his voice fatherly, "we won't need you partic'lar at that inquest tomorra, if you want to ride for the Campstool t'night. The law, I reckon, will understand.

"An' leave them damn' nesters with this town in their laps?" Ren demanded, his wide eyes narrowing.

The squat marshal saw Ren's sudden rage, and he retreated a step.

Then Ren surprised him with a grin. "Hell, marshal, we'll stick around. Looks like the makin's of a good-sized fuss hereabouts. Them dirt-hongry squatters have killt two of us. But there's four of us left, an' the buzzards'll learn that *any* four Palidays makes quite a heap, take 'em all together."

Ren turned to face his brothers. "Boys, we better find a bed and git some shut-eye. Pa nor Brule wouldn't want us to miss our rest, on 'count o' them. Not when we got work to do."

"They'd boot us all clean back to the Little Piney, if they come aroun' an' caught us mournin' 'em," Lon suggested.

"Yeah," Lin echoed. "Pa'd turn over in his grave. An' Brule, he'd cuss us out proper."

CHAPTER THREE

Dark-Town Ambush

THE inquest drew the heaviest crowd Big Piney had seen since the Big Die. The squatters didn't come, though. They acted, Ren said, like it was none of their put-in. And the coroner's jury brought in the customary verdict: " . . . died from bullets inflicted each by the hand of the other party, deceased. Responsibility unfixed."

The inquest done, Ren left his brothers to oversee the burial, riding alone for

Barrel Springs to look over the barbwire and the springs. And it was past dark when he rejoined his brothers.

It was a custom in the clan, Benny learned then, that when one of the brothers was absent from a drinking, the liquor was ordered for him, the same as if he'd been there—the extra drink going to the last man to down his own. And Benny had not mastered the technique of swallowing Paddlefoot's forty-rod whiskey, at one gulp, throwing it far enough back onto his tongue so that it only hit once before going down. He drank it as he drank from the dipper at home. So he drew the extra drink—Brule's drink.

"Don't know as he ought to have it," Lon observed, "lookin' at the hell he raised on his last drink."

"Give 'im two," Lin agreed, "an' he'll pop for shore."

"Leave him be," Ren growled. "He's got to learn. An' he's learnin'."

Benny tackled his second drink. Still shuddering from its convulsive bite, he turned to hear Ren's report.

"I see now what it was Brule was tryin' to tell us about them squatters," Ren was saying. "Same as Chet Sombers said about the gunner on the floor in here last night. Ain't none of 'em homesteaders. They all just like the one in here. High heels an' guns, an' women's hands. They're gunners some man's shipped in here to work. Each of 'em is squattin' on a piece o' ground, an' has put a tent up on it. But there ain't no houses goin' up, no sod bein' broke. An' there ain't any water on their spreads. Only our'n."

What about Barrel Springs?" Lin asked.

"Yeah," Lon put in. "The springs fenced in any?"

Ren Paliday took a deep breath, and looked at his brothers, each in his turn, as if evaluating them all before speaking. "Yeah," he said at last, looking back at his drink. "We're fenced in. We can't git to them springs without trespassin'. An' they've got twenty, thirty guns up there, to see nobody don't trespass. So there goes our summer range."

"Like hell," Benny said quickly, anger sweeping over him. "They can't keep fences on our ground. There ain't a law in the land—"

"Fences ain't on *our* ground," Ren cut in. "That's the hell of it."

"How they got us fenced in then?"

Ren scowled. "Why, hell, you ain't got to put wire on a man's own ground to fence him off it. All you got to do is fence the ground on all four sides of him. Works out jus' the same, an' yo're inside the law." He paused, his bleak eyes probing those of his brothers. "An' that's what makes it look more'n ever like somebody with brains is backin' them sodbusters. Couldn't jus' sorta happen that way."

"How'd you get through to the springs?"

"Trespassed. Wide an' handsome. Didn't give a damn."

"Didn't you meet no homesteaders? None of these fancy sodbusters?"

"Yeah. An' they told me to stay off their ground. But I—wal, I 'membered what the marshal said. An' I persecuted my own case, sort of. Two o' them squatters is hung up on the wire now. Make right passin' scarecrows."

"Well, what we goin' to do? Ride up there an' hang out some more crows?"

Ren looked at his brothers again, each in his turn. He lowered his voice. "Yeah. But we ain't ridin' nowheres. Right here is where she'll come to a head, I reckon. Lissen: Brule was right about them fences, too. They're cockeyed. Jus' two wires on them posts, and they're all the same. They'd stop a cow, but not a calf. I've got a hunch—"

Ren's voice trailed off into silence because the saloon doors swung inward, and Joe Kiskaris came through them. With him were half a dozen of his sheepherders. The Palidays bristled as the sheepmen lined up at the bar beside them. But Kiskaris disarmed them with his ready smile.

"Howdy, boys," the big, genial sheeper boomed. "I'm buyin'."

Kiskaris was a bull of a man, shorter than the Palidays, yet big in a way that the Palidays would never be big—through the middle and up his barrel chest to his neck. His toneless gray eyes were so concealed by his black overhang of brow that they were seldom seen. So a man never knew when Sheeper Joe meant his smile and when he didn't.

SHEEPER JOE had come onto the Piney grasslands along with the squatters, moving his ragged bands up from the Little Sandy badlands as soon as it was evident that there would be no cows on the Little Piney meadows that year. He had let it be known that he intended only to feed up his market lambs on the cowgrass that summer, then move on. But it was soon noted that Sheeper Joe made his layout in the manner of a man who plans to stay longer than a summer.

He'd built salt roads around to get away from packing, and his herds moved across the bottomlands like ground fogs, drifting about instead of feeding off one place to the dirt as sheepers do when feeding the other man's ground.

No, Sheeper Joe was going at it like he owned his range land. And he wasn't crowding anybody. The nearest cow ranch was the Campstool on the Big Piney, and that was twenty miles away, with the Piney Hills in between. These hills offered sweet sheep range, too, but Sheeper Joe seemed to know his place. He was almighty careful to keep his flocks in the bottoms on his own side of the range, even though it was known he didn't have enough grass where he was to see him through the summer.

Thus, Sheeper Joe had caused no trouble. But, in the Paliday code, drinking with a man was a commitment to friendship. And the clan had no such commitment for a sheeper.

"We lifted one alone, Joe," Ren answered, still the spokesman for the brothers. "We like our'n without ticks, thanks."

The smile faded from Sheeper Joe's jowled face. Then he forced the grin again. "On the warpath, eh? Well, can't oblige yuh today, boys. I'm busy."

"Wouldn't be busy settin' out no posts, now, would yuh, Joe?" Ren's voice was so quiet it made Benny wonder what his brother could be driving at.

Joe Kiskaris laughed heavily. "So that's it! Got yore back up over the barbwire. Wal, Ren, you kin count me outa that. Barbwire's no better medicine for sheep than for cows."

"Might depend," Ren insisted. "An' I don't see you sweatin' no blood over that squatter stand in the Piney Hills."

"That's right," Kiskaris admitted, signaling the barkeeper for drinks. "You don't. An' you won't. That ain't my funeral, losin' the Piney Hills to the nesters. You've kept ever'body else off that range, cornerin' the water, like you done. So nobody else won't feel the squeeze. Trouble with you cowmen, yo're too damn one-sided. You forgit there ain't a game ever invented that can't be played two ways.

"Ever since the first cow was born, cowmen's been hoggin' grass. You boys got the runnin' of all them hills there just by filin' on the water holes. Other stockmen couldn't git by without water, so we was all shut out. But dry farmers don't need no water. They kin git by." The sheepman laughed. "Now that the boot's on a different foot, it don't wear so good. 'Cause water holes ain't worth a tinker's damn if yuh can't git to 'em, an' if yuh ain't got any ground."

Ren Paliday had shifted his position so as to face the sheepman more squarely, and Benny felt the whiskey fire kindle inside him again. "Then yuh mean, Sheeper Joe, that yo're backin' the squatters?"

KISKARIS licked his lips and settled his weight back on his heels. "If you mean, am I in with 'em, no. If you mean, will I side them in a showdown agin' you range-hoggin' cowmen, the answer is *yeah!* You've run this here country long as yo're about to, Paliday. You kin kick dogs 'bout so long, then they'll turn on yuh. Us little men are learnin' to stand together, an' by God we do now. Is that what you been itchin' to know?"

Ren Paliday nodded once; a short, jerky movement of his head. He eased himself away from the bar to clear his gun. His wide shoulders were hunched just a little, his head was pushed slightly forward.

Taking their cue, Lin and Lon edged farther yet from the bar, to range themselves on Ren's far side, facing the sheepers. Benny remained where he was, because the others, in moving, had already put him in the clear. The youth's whiskey-warmed blood pounded at his temples, and his right hand trembled a little by his holster. This would be Benny's first gun-

fight. He was all keyed-up, and he couldn't be sure of himself.

"That's what I been itchin' to know, Kiskaris," Ren's voice came as soft as a whisper. "This here is war, Joe. One of us has had his guts ripped out on the squatters' wire. Another of us has been gunned down by a slick that was shipped in an' hired to do the job. The rest of us ain't waitin' for that, an' yo're either for us or agin' us. If you stand with the sod-busters, Joe, why then I reckon it's yore move."

"Shore." Kiskaris spoke, and he moved. But only to turn back to the bar and his waiting drink. He picked up the glass and looked at Ren over his shoulder. He laughed again, harshly. "Hell, you think I'd suck inta a trap like that? When I fight, young 'un, I fight *my* way!"

The sheeper raised his glass high in an elaborate gesture, pledging his hired hands in a voice that sounded extra loud: Here's *how!*"

It seemed to Benny afterward that those words were a sort of signal; that the sheeper had meant, really, "Here's how I fight." For there was a tinkle of glass behind the Palidays at that moment. And the room was turned to stone.

Ren whirled, dragging at his gun, but he never completed his draw. He wasn't even turned around when the gun crashed from the darkness outside, and he whirled back around the way he had come. The gun cracked again, and Ren, his back toward the window, straightened, bowing his shoulders back until he appeared deformed. He balanced thus a second on his toes. The gun thundered for the third time, and Ren gasped. Then he toppled to the floor.

THE other Palidays had whirled as Ren had whirled, and the twins were running, shoulder to shoulder, toward the door. Their guns were in their hands, but they weren't shooting; only running.

Benny stood paralyzed by the bar. Then he saw a carbine barrel sticking through a little jagged hole in the big plate glass window. Above the barrel was a white, pinched face. Darkness shrouded the features, and only the eyes were clear and distinct. Deep jade eyes that reflected the light of the saloon lamp. Shining like a cat's.

Those glaring eyes seemed to release a spring somewhere inside Benny—the taut steel spring that had held him motionless. His hand dropped to his gun, and as the carbine pumped the third slug into Ren's tortured body, Benny's gun came up. He was shooting then, triggering as fast as he could.

The figure at the window jerked halfway around and tried to run. Benny fired the last shot in his bucking gun, and the running man stumbled falling on his face on the sidewalk.

The twins were bending over the prostrate man as Benny came out the door. Lon looked up, his dark face pinched into a scowl. "Yuh damn' hair-brained shavetail! Look what you've done! This two-legged rattler's deader'n last year's beef. He might of told us somethin', if he could. He can't now. Why in hell can't yuh let us handle things, if this is a sample o' yore managin'?"

"Yeah," Lin put in, echoing the accusation. "Why can't yuh stay put? I knew we shouldn't of let yuh have that last drink. But Ren held out for yuh. Now look at 'im. We—here she is!"

Lin had been going through the dead man's pockets, and he straightened now with a crumpled and torn half of a five-hundred dollar bill.

Deflated and hurt, Benny didn't share the twins' interest in the find. He stood quiet where he was, looking down at the bleeding man on the walk, the first ever to fall before his gun. Gradually it came to him that the man on the plank sidewalk was dressed as the other hired gunner had been. Big hat and boots, and the bibbed overalls of a squatter. But, also like the others, his hands were white and uncalloused.

Lon's voice aroused Benny. "By God—another one!"

"Shore as hell," Lin gasped. "An' how did it get there?"

Benny turned to see his brothers back to the saloon door, looking at a ragged piece of brown wrapping paper stuck to the wood with a postage stamp. Lon pushed the door open to let the lamplight reach the paper, and Benny joined the twins to read the penciled words:

Four little Palidays, spoiling for a spree
They looked for war and found it. Now
there is three.

Lon Paliday cursed bleakly. "That wasn't there when we come out. I know damn' well it wasn't. An' where in hell is Sheeper Joe?"

Benny looked inside the bar. The sheepmen were gone. But footsteps sounded down the walk, and there went Kiskaris and his crew, legging it toward the Chief Hotel. They weren't looking back.

"Hmm," said Lon softly. "I wonder now—"

Lon didn't finish his speculation, and Lin didn't get his put-in. For a dark, two-legged form loomed at them out of the darkness. It was Chet Sombers. And the lawman was laying down a torrent of profanity that was appalling to the ear.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Then There Was One . . . "

THERE was no inquest into the deaths of Ren Paliday and the nameless gunner who died out on the sidewalk after killing Ren. Chet Sombers would push the farce of the law no further. He helped the remaining Palidays bury Ren in a packing-case coffin beside Brule and his father. Then he invited the Palidays to take over the case.

"Just write yore own law-ticket in this town," the marshal said to them. "An' I'll sign 'er."

That was wagon-room to move in, and the Palidays walked once more down to Paddlefoot's place to talk it over. Five drinks were ordered again. But the twins did all the drinking.

"You jus' stay 'way from likker, Benmy," Lon said. "A long ways away, till you learn how to handle it."

"Yeah," Lin nodded. This ain't no time to be learnin'."

Their insinuation rankled inside Benny, and he looked hard out the window, choking back the hot words that came to his tongue, the tears that washed his eyes. The twins blamed him for the killing of Brule and Ren; blamed him for his actions on both occasions. They said it was because he couldn't hold his liquor. And he hadn't been drunk either time.

"Well, what we goin' to do?" Benny asked harshly at length. "Our scalps is worth five hundred dollars each in this town. An' it 'ppears there's plenty o' takers."

Lon slammed his glass down onto the bar. "We're a-ridin' up to the Piney Hills. An' when we git there, we'll shoot every dog we see—two-legged or four!"

"Shore as hell!" Lin chanted. "An' when we get through with that barbwire, nobody'd know it'd been a fence."

"Ren said to stay aroun' town," Benny objected, still feeling low. "He said right here the fuss'd be settled."

"That's what he said, right enough. Now he's dead."

"Yeah. Brule said the same thing. Brule, he's dead, too. We ain't a-waitin' to be gulched the same way!" Lin finished.

"There's somethin' we don't see," Benny insisted. "Somethin' that's right on the end o' our noses. Brule an' Ren both seen it, an' it's got somethin' to do with them fences. If we could figger it out, we'd have 'er licked."

"We can figger 'er out up there."

"Yeah. Le's ride."

Swaggering on their high heels, the Paliday twins started for the door. Benny stood where he was, jaw out-thrust, blue eyes stubborn. Benny was revolting for the first time against the authority of an older brother. "I'm stayin'!" he called. "Ren said—"

A crash of rifle fire from across the street cut Benny off. The twins, caught flat-footed in the open swing doors, didn't have a chance. Lin spun clear around and fell backwards inside the saloon. Lon yelled hoarsely as lead nailed into him, then he dropped to one knee against the door casing, trying hard to draw his gun from its holster.

The pistol came up all right, with both Lon's hands trying to steady it. But one slug after another tore through his jerking, swaying body. He gave a faltering, bubbling cry and sank back against the saloon wall, his legs sprawling grotesquely like broken sticks.

Benny, saved from death by his decision to stay behind, heard Paddlefoot curse as the firing started. Then Benny's gun was in his hand and he was over against the

window. Gunsmoke floated up in little white puffballs from behind a pile of empty flour and salt kegs against a general merchandise store across the road. Benny cut down on that barrel pile, crisscrossing his lead to rake the frail breastworks that shielded the hidden killers.

Both Lin and Lon were down now, and Benny drew the rifle fire. Whining lead snarled as it went by him, throwing glass and wood splints into his face. But he kept shooting until his gun-hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Grim-lipped and silent, he broke the pistol to reload its hot, smoking cylinder from his belt. But there was a step behind him, and Paddlefoot Renfro shoved a double-barreled shotgun into his hands. Both hammers were eared back.

"There's hoss nails an' buggy burrs inside 'er, Benny," the saloonman said. "An' she scatters like hell. Pour it on 'em!"

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BENNY leveled the gun and pulled both triggers, one and then the other. The old piece leaped twice in his hands, and the barrel barricade collapsed before his eyes. Benny stood quiet a moment, watching the shattered kegs out of narrowed eyes, and he saw no movement there. No sound reached his ears.

"You've silenced their shore batteries, as they s'y in the navy," the barman boomed, reaching for the shotgun to reload it. "Now board 'em an' give 'em the steel."

Benny Paliday loaded his pistol, dropped it into his holster, accepted the reloaded shotgun, and stepped to the sidewalk outside. Pausing there, he looked up and down the false-fronted street. The town, from all appearance, was deserted.

Slowly, and with his shotgun ready, Benny approached the broken barrel heap and kicked the shattered head from a drum. He could see a man lying face down half inside it. Benny stepped behind the barrel and pulled the dead man out by one boot, turning him over with his boot-toe.

The top of the gunner's head was blown away. Something was clutched in his hand. Benny pried the lifeless fingers apart and found another scrap of wrapping paper with writing on it:

> Three little Palidays, squarin' off to run.
> Runnin' was too late then. So there was

The last word was missing, torn off. And Benny tried, unconsciously, to complete the rhyme. "One." That would have made it. Or "none." Maybe they'd meant to get Benny too. The cowboy shrugged and wadded the paper into his pocket. It didn't matter. He fumbled inside the down man's shirt pocket and found half a five hundred dollar bill. This he pocketed also.

Then he stiffened, and his grip tightened on his shotgun. A red-splashed trail led from the barrels to the rear corner of the store, and around it. Benny straightened and followed that trail. He was ready for business when he rounded the corner. But no one was in sight. Nothing there, but the scarlet line of red on the grass. Shoulders stiff and every sense alert, Benny followed the red blood-trail behind Big Piney's row of business houses.

He lost the trail in Sam Ryestock's lumber yard. Circling wide around the sawdust, he found it again, fifty yards farther on. He could see from where he stood that it led straight into the slide doors of an old gray livery barn at the edge of town. And the barn was known to all cowmen as the squatters' headquarters.

Icy calm now, Benny approached the barn. And when his shadow had fallen black before him through the open, sunlit door, he stopped to cock the scattergun. He waited, listening. Not a sound came to him from the building. Not the faintest stirring. Not a breath.

BENNY pushed his hat back to give him higher vision and stepped inside. Pausing again, he ran his eye over the vacant stalls, the old, loose-tired buggies stored there, and the harness and gear. He saw no living thing. But the blood trail showed plainly on the manure-covered door. It led straight to a small partition door, and through it. Benny approached that door soundlessly, and voices came to his ears. He strained to hear, but the words wouldn't come distinct. He

leveled the gun in front of him and kicked the door open.

He stood looking into a small, windowless room. A saddle room. His eyes adjusted to the gloom, and he saw Sheeper Joe Kiskaris bending over a man who sat there on an upturned nail keg. The dark blood trail led straight to the keg, and the sitting man held a blood-stained neck scarf to his face. Two or three squatters stood about, looking at Benny out of eyes that seemed to want to smile. Sheeper Joe flashed Benny one of his quick grins.

"You lose somethin', Benny?" the sheeper asked. And Benny couldn't decide whether the grin was mirthful or just plain mocking.

"Yeah." Benny still held the shotgun leveled in front of him. He curled his finger around the triggers and stepped into the room. "I lost the man that left that line of blood on yore floor. I want that man, Joe."

"You mean Sim here?" the sheepman questioned, his manner wide and innocent. "It hurt you, 'cause he stepped on a stick in the lumber yard an' it flew up an' hit 'im in the nose?"

Benny's eyes didn't change. Neither did his voice. "Take that scarf off his face, Kiskaris."

The sheepman seemed to draw all himself into his thick middle, and his fingers stiffened along his stocky legs. Toneless gray lights gleamed again from under his shaggy brows.

"You givin' *me* orders, cowpoke?"

Benny's only movement was to raise the muzzle of his gun slightly. It was pointing square at the sheeper's throat. "You heard me, Sheeper Joe."

Kiskaris did an unexpected thing. He grinned and shrugged. "Okay, cowboy. I jus' wanted to git things straight."

Reaching out with one hand, the sheepman took the bandana from the sitting man's face. The latter's nose was bleeding, all right. And there was no wound on him. Only a little dark bruise on one side of his nose. And that caused by something blunt.

Benny looked hard, and the sheepman's grin widened. "Didn't you never see no nosebleed before, Benny?"

Benny Paliday stood motionless, his head whirling in confusion. Then something stirred in the shadows against the dim wall to his right. Benny looked from the corner of his eye and the back of his neck went cold. Gun metal glinted faintly in the deeper shadows there. Half a dozen guns were trained on him.

And that was the give-away. Benny knew then that the squatters had seen him coming. They'd expected him, and prepared for him. And that could mean only one thing. The man on the stool wasn't the man Benny had trailed. It was another.

It was no difficult matter to give a man a nosebleed. The man Benny had wounded behind the barrels was somewhere in that very room, likely back in the shadows with those rifles. And Benny couldn't do anything about it. The odds were too great. Dying now didn't seem important. But Benny had several things he had to do before he could die.

These things were in his mind as he forced a grin. "Guess I jumped wrong, Joe," he said. "B-be damn' careful you don't."

Turning then, Benny walked toward the door, half expecting a shot in the back. But the only shot came from Sheeper Joe Kiskaris' taunting lips.

"Careful, Benny, on yore way out. Don't step on no sticks out there!"

And a low, unpleasant rumble of laughter followed Benny from the barn.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Cowmen Don't Never Die"

OUT into the sunlight again, Benny legged it back toward Paddlefoot Renfro's place. He didn't know where else to go. And with each step he took, he pondered what he had seen.

Kiskaris was in on the grass war. There could no longer be any doubt about that. But how? And why? What had the sheepman to gain from stringing with the squatters? They'd choke him, too, in time, as surely as they'd choke the cowmen. What was the payoff?

Benny puzzled over this until his head hurt. And still there was no answer.

He stopped suddenly in front of the saloon, and looked with surprise at the sidewalk. Lin and Lon were gone. The red

stains were still where they had fallen drying in the sun. But the bodies were nowhere in sight.

He stepped inside the bullet-shattered building. "Where the boys go?" he asked of Paddlefoot.

The saloonman was gulping a drink, and his face was greenish white. "Chet come an' got 'em on his cart. Took 'em up to boot-hill, along with the hombre you hoss-nailed. Chet says it keeps him hustlin' these days, just swampin' out the town."

Benny leaned on the bar, and the barman swore a startled oath. "God's sake! What's on yore back?"

Benny looked up, surprised. "What is?" And he stood quiet while the saloonkeeper plucked another scrap of brown wrapping paper, and it had been fastened to the full part of his shirt with a bent pin. Renfro spread the paper on the bar, and Benny leaned over the barman's shoulder to read the penciled words on it:

One little Paliday couldn't have no fun
Benny stuck his neck out. Then there was none.

Paddlefoot released a fresh torrent of profanity. But Benny stood frozen, staring at the paper with blank uncomprehending amazement paralysing his brain. Then he saw a faint bit of light.

"Th-they hung that on me in the barn. A w-warnin', I guess."

"Warnin' hell!" Paddlefoot exclaimed. "That's a *'bituary,* if ever I see one. Yo're already dead, Benny, far as them buzzards is concerned. What barn was you in?"

Briefly, Benny told where he'd been and what he'd found.

"Kiskaris, eh?" the barman said, a far-off look in his muddy brown eyes. Paddlefoot didn't say more. He merely stood, drumming the bartop with his fingers.

"Yeah. But why? An' what's the payoff?" Benny bent his head and pounded it with his fist. "There's somethin' there. Somethin' I couldn't see, an' can't yet. Brule saw it, an' Ren saw it. It's somethin' to do with the fences. They both mentioned them. Only two wires. Up high. Stop a cow, they said. But not a calf. But what—"

"Or a sheep, maybe?"

"Huh?"

The barman dropped his eyes quickly and shrugged. "If a fence wouldn't stop a calf, I reckon it wouldn't stop no sheep."

"Sheep?" Benny stared blankly, fumbling for some connection between sheep and the barbwire. Then a cold light broke inside his head. "Hey. Wait a minute! You mean that Kiskaris is backin' the squatters 'cause he's in with them, direct? That they're only fencin' that range to keep cows an' horses off, an' that sheep could still have the run of all them hills, goin' under the fences like they wasn't there?"

The barman twisted uncomfortably. "I didn't say that. *Yo're* sayin' it, yore own self. But I don't see nothing wrong with it. Not right off."

"Then the squatters ain't homesteaders a-tall! They're high-priced gunners, all of 'em. Brought in to build an' hold them fences, for Sheeper Joe. A-and—them five hundred dollar bills been comin' straight from Sheeper Joe!"

"Now Benny," the barman complained.

"Paddlefoot," Benny broke in, "we're dry. We need a drink. An' we got one one comin', I reckon. Set 'em up!"

"We?" The barman's muddy eyes protruded.

"Yeah. Shore. Us Palidays don't die! We allus drink together."

Paddlefoot remembered then. It seemed funny, sort of. Almost scary, Benny talkin' that way, with his four brothers so fresh-planted up on the hill. But Paddlefoot poured five drinks and set them up.

Benny raised the first glass in silent pledge to his absent brothers. He was

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touching it to his lips and shivering over it when the swing doors flew open, and Sheeper Joe Kiskaris pushed inside.

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KISKARIS was followed by four hard-eyed gunners in bibbed overalls, and he no longer bothered to smile as he bellied the bar next to Benny and lined his men up beside him.

Sheeper Joe had the bulge now. And he wasn't wasting it. From the way the sheeper looked at Paddlefoot Renfro, Benny wondered if one of the gunners had overheard what the barman had told him.

Benny paid the sheepmen no visible heed. He concentrated his whole attention and effort to swallowing the whiskey without a fuss, and he tossed off the drinks, one by one, under the gunmen's covert eyes. The whiskey kindled one continuous fire from his tongue to his stomach, but the heat was nothing as compared to the flame that heated his veins.

Kiskaris and his gunners watched in amazed silence as Benny downed the five drinks in silent ritual.

"You shore must be figgerin' on a reg'lar spree, Paliday. You still spoilin' for war, an' augerin' yore guts for it?"

Benny swallowed the last drink, and stood still a minute swallowing it a second time. Then he turned slowly to face the sheeper.

"How much do you bid on the Campstool holdings, Joe?"

Benny's voice was toneless but even, and the sheepman couldn't have been more surprised if Benny'd pulled off his own right arm and offered it to him.

"*Bid?* The *Campstool?* What the hell? You runnin'? A Paliday?"

"I said, how much you b-bid?" That slight stutter alone betrayed the tightness Benny felt inside him.

"Why now, Benny," the sheeper's voice was suddenly friendly. "Why, I dunno, right off. Never figgered I'd be buyin' it. But I reckon a deal could be swung. I could give yuh a check—"

"Check hell!" Benny bit back. "Yo're check's worth no more to me than yore word. C-cash it'd be."

The sheeper's surprise mounted, and his greed flashed in his almost hidden eyes. "Wal, I could raise some cash, I reckon."

"What you got now, to clinch it? How much cash? I ain't got all d-day."

"Why." Kiskaris was smiling now, and his voice was hearty, affectionate. "Why, I got some right here now. Enough to hold the deal, I guess. I got, let's see—"

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a huge old wallet. It bulged with green paper, and the sheepman laid the bills out one at a time on the bar. All were in the five-hundred dollar denomination.

"—Five hundred, thousan', fifteen hundred, two thousan', twenty-five hun—*Woop!*"

The torn half of one of those bills had turned up in the roll, and Kiskaris tried to crowd it back into the purse. But Benny's right hand closed like a sprung trap on the sheepman's wrist, his left coming up to tear the tough paper from Sheeper Joe's fingers.

"This is all I'll need, Joe," Benny said. "R-reckon it'll match one o' them tore bills I got in my pocket. Bills that I picked up off the gunners that killed my brothers."

"Hey, now, what in—" The sheepman panted hard, blinking at Benny. Then realization flashed across his big face, turning it purple and red. "Why you damn', tricky double-crossin' coyote!"

Sheeper Joe said no more. The look in Benny Paliday's eyes stopped him short. He stared, frog-eyed. Then he coughed. "So this is showdown, eh, Benny?" he said then, still breathing heavily. "Odds are kinda heavy, boy. Shore you want it this way?"

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BENNY PALIDAY'S voice matched the ice in his eyes. "I wouldn't have it no other, Joe." There was no stammer in his voice now.

The sheepman coughed again. "These boys o' mine savvy the gun purty well, Benny. If I say the word—"

"I'm fightin' you now," Paliday said. "Them later. First one of them goes for a gun, I go too. Only I shoot you, Joe, first. So you better reach 'fore any o' them do."

The sheepman stood motionless and uncertain. He forced a grin, and started to say something joshing. But it wouldn't come.

"Okay, Benny. You got me. I reckon yo're waitin' for me to draw first, eh? Wal, I'll be right with yuh. Got to git myself in hand a little, is all."

Just like that. No backing water, no crying, no fear in the toneless gray eyes. Sheeper Joe might hire his killing done in an underhanded way, but caught in his own trap, Joe was game.

Sheeper Joe's bushy eyes froze to the pit of Benny's stomach, and his big hand jammed down toward his gun. It was a fast move, and smoothly executed. But neither fast nor smooth enough to match Paliday's blurred draw.

Benny fired twice before the sheeper had even brought his gun up. Both Benny's slugs took Kiskaris in the forehead, and half a dollar would have covered both white, bloodless holes.

The gunmen behind Kiskaris had followed their boss into action, and they were shooting now, shooting with a vengeance. The gun-roar beat at Benny's eardrums, and scalding pain slashed into his left shoulder. He knew he was hit. But he leaped forward and caught Sheeper Joe against him before the swaying man had fallen. Holding the dying sheepman against him for a shield, he returned the gunners' fire.

There were four of them left; four slugs in Benny's gun. The cowboy rationed his lead carefully. His leap in against Kiskaris had placed him in among the four henchmen, so that each man endangered his partners with his fire. The gunmen perceived this, and while they hesitated, Benny shot two of them through the head, one slug to each of them. A scrawny, beaked-nosed man with red-rimmed eyes jumped to one side, firing as he went. His lead grazed Benny's head.

Benny noticed for the first time that the gunman's left arm was bandaged beneath his torn shirt sleeve. The bandage was wet with new blood. He would be the one Benny had shot behind the barrels. The man who'd helped kill the Paliday twins!

Benny fired once, and his luck held. The man went down. The one remaining gunman, seeing he stood alone, leaped toward the bar for cover. Benny thumbed a shot at him—his last—and missed. Grinning, the gunman crouched behind the bar and leveled his pistol for the shot that would end the fight, and end the Big Piney grass war. But it was Paddlefoot Renfro, really, who ended that feud. Renfro's scattergun broke the gunner's skull.

Benny stood swaying on his heels, rubbing his eyes. Then he got himself in hand and nodded to the saloonkeeper.

"M-much obliged, Paddlefoot," he said. Then he knelt beside Joe Kiskaris and went through the sheepman's wallet, taking out three more half greenbacks, all of the five hundred dollar denomination, and walked out the saloon door. He lurched as he walked, and he left a crimson red trail behind him.

Chet Sombers came in a minute later and surveyed the havoc with a baleful eye. "What happened to Benny?"

Paddlefoot waved toward the door. "He went out. Reckon he was goin' to the graveyard."

"I just come from there," the marshal said. "I must of missed him." And Sombers turned and left.

(Continued on page 112)

GEORGES SURDEZ

has written, in this great new novelette of the remnants of the Legion in Indo-China,

WHAT I WANT, I TAKE!

the powerful story of two men—as different as the Lord can turn men out. Bretal, who was determined to fight on for his beloved France despite the fact that the Germans were in Paris. And Chanod the outcast, cynical dealer in death, who laughed at Bretal for his loyalty—yet found it hard to forget the land that had given him birth. Plus other good stories by Robert Ormond Case, Steve Fisher, John Russell, Louis C. Goldsmith, R. W. Daly and the usual interesting departments and features that can be found only in—

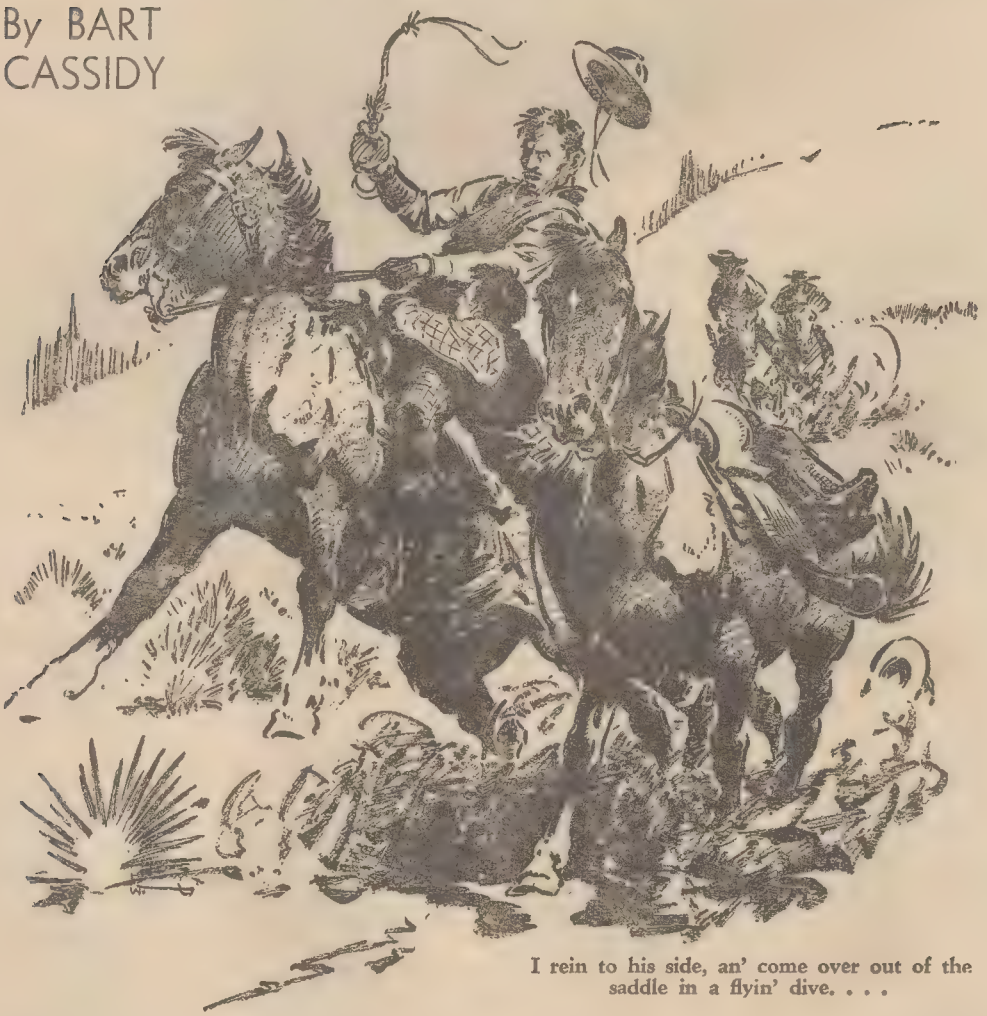
Adventure

15c

The April issue—on sale MARCH 7th

Tensleep Buys a Horse!

By BART CASSIDY



I rein to his side, an' come over out of the saddle in a flyin' dive. . . .

Tensleep, hunted horse-fancier, really should have known better than to pay his honest money for that wonderful Apaluse, instead of following his usual light-fingered inclinations. . . . For the bill-of-sale he carried so proudly in his pocket was only valid as a passport to the waiting hangnoose!

THE gent that named the honest way the "straight an' narrow trail" must have been full of forty-rod busthead at the time. Accordin' to my experience, a man who figgers to go it a hundred percent honest is more'n apt to find himself wallerin' without rhyme, reason or direction across a scope of landscape that makes the owlhoot look like walkin' the tightrope. Like that time I laid a hundred dollars on the line an' took title to the classiest Apalusian gelding I ever laid eyes on. An' these eyes have seen some mighty fine hawssflesh in their

time, as many a lawman's reward dodger, sayin' that Tensleep Maxon is wanted plenty for his hankerin' for hawsses, can testify.

It began in Contention—a backwoods county seat in the Colorado Rockies. I'd drifted in there from the south with a hundred dollars in my jeans—never mind how I got it. I put Glory Hawss on the oats first off, an' I'm rattlin' my spurs out of the feed barn when this Apaluse whickers at me from a stall. I square off to admire him, and he's sure easy on the eyes. Blue as the haze that settles into desert canyons of an evening, with a polka-dotted here and there and splashed with big white spots across his rump. He's lookin' at me with friendly, wide-spaced eyes, his little head cocked high, his pin ears slanted forward. Plumb invitin' me.

To cut it short, no animal ever taken to me like this one. An' it's plumb mutual. I'm cuddlin' him a little when a voice says: "Whole lot of horse there, stranger, eh?" It's the barn man, returnin' from grainin' Glory.

"Cute as a little red schoolhouse," I enthuse. "Yours?"

"Mine till I find a buyer, stranger." His face falls an' his eyes go bleak. "I gotta send my wife to a hospital in Denver. That takes dinero. I'm sacrificin' a lot of things I wouldn't ordinarily part with for love or money."

"I'm sorry, mister," I murmur, an' hit the question light. "How—how much you askin'?"

"Ain't set no price on him, stranger. He's worth five hundred if he's worth a cent. But that ain't hay in these parts. No, if I could get two hundred, I'd let him go."

My heart sinks. "That lets me out. A hundred is all I've got an' I don't know where I could get more just now. I—I hope you find a buyer, mister."

He shakes his head, studyin' me, strokin' his jaw. "I can see you love hawsses, my friend, and that carries weight. I'll let you have him for a hundred."

"Furnish a bill of sale?" I ask, suspicious.

"Write it out," he says, glum. "Sign it Jeff Mapes an' I'll make my mark on it. Best I can do, stranger, 'cause all of us ain't had the advantage of schoolin'. Not bein' able to writ sure does handicap a man."

Never was a bill of sale wrote faster, I'm that scairt he'll change his mind. I pay him the hundred; he makes his mark, an' the Apaluse is mine. I've got just enough left to buy a sawbuck packsaddle an' a little grub. Then, leadin' Apaluse, I ride out of Contention with all the pride of honest ownership.

Fox-trottin' along the trail, I'm five-six mile north of Contention with my two ponies head to head an' nuzzlin' each other friendly, when half a dozen riders come flashin' through the timber ahead. They're led by a squat, big bodied gent with a star gleamin' on his breast. Cripes! By habit, my nerves tighten up like sun-dryin' rawhide.

* * *

THE posse whirls up to me, the sheriff rearin' his pony straight up with a cruel Spanish bit. I've got this lawman's number the instant I spot the blood at the corner of his pony's mouth, an' along his tender belly strip, where spurs have ate through. I rein to a stop an' a minute passed, with the outfit lookin' my ponies over.

"Nice hawssflesh," hums the sheriff. "Real nice. Where'd you get that Apaluse, if I might be so bold?"

"In Contention, from Jeff Mapes."

"Mapes!" The sheriff flashes a look at his men. "Got a bill of sale?"

"Sure." I produce same an' the sheriff reads it. Then he's rollin' out a deep belly laugh.

"This is a fake," he states, soberin'. "It ain't in Jeff Mapes' handwritin' which I know as well as my own, an' it's signed—"

"Jeff Mapes can't write!" I snap at him. "He asked me to write it out."

That sends 'em off into gales of laughter. "That's good," one guffaws. "Jeff Mapes can't write—a man who got his start teachin' school in Contention!"

An' suddenly I get a feelin' that somewhere along the line I've been took.

The sheriff whips out his gun, covers me. "It don't wash, stranger. You stole this brute an' I'm takin' you in. And you'll give us the lowdown on the rest of your

gang, where you hang out an' what you've done with all the hawsses you've stole outa this country. Take his iron, boys."

They take my gun an' start me an' my ponies back to'rds Contention. All I can do is swaller my crushed feeling an' choke back a growing bitterness. We ain't gone halfway to town when two men come loping to meet us. A cowman an' a cowboy, from the looks of 'em.

"Sheriff Caskey!" The grizzled rancher pulls up, parts his longhorn mustaches an' spits. "I've rode over hell's half acre lookin' for you. Somebody sawed the chain on my corral last night and got away with my Apaluse stud an' three two year old geldings. This is the last straw, Ogalalla. You get them ponies back an' show results, or I'm takin' the stump. . . ."

"Whoa up, Bob!" Sheriff Caskey holds up his hand. "Got your man right here." He turned to me. "Mister Hawssthief, meet Spittin' Bob Bangs, the man you've stole all them Apalusians from. Don't reckon you've seen him, except mebby through the window of a dark night. Bob, we just caught him makin' off with Jeff Mapes' colt that he got from you, an' a bill of sale signed by Jeff with an X. Can you beat that?"

"I don't care a hang about Jeff Mapes and his horses," rages the horse rancher. "What I want is them ponies of mine. It adds to a dozen now, in a year. You find them colts, Ogalalla, or—" He spits, glaring.

"When I get this gent in jail," promises the sheriff, "I'll find out where they hold your stuff, Bob, or I'll burn him to a cinder. I'll fry him to a crisp if he don't talk. Le's get goin'."

We continue on, Bob Bangs ridin' along with grumblin's, threats an' complaints. He's mad, an' I'm gettin' in the same state—as much from the way the sheriff treats his horse as from a feeling of personal abuse. The animal, sore from continual rowelin' an' jerkin' with that nasty spade bit, is actin' up, its nerves crackin'. An' the fool lawman tries to quiet it by more of the same.

"Give him his head," I bark once, "an' keep your rawls out of them cuts on his briskit. What you expect him to do?"

"Same as I expect of you," he snaps. "Shut up, an' do what you're told!"

A minute later, the pony takes to shakin' its head. An' when he jerks up on the rein, it bucks a few. The sheriff, cursin' an' ravin', jerks a quirt from the horn an' starts layin' it on. That's too much for me. I rein to his side, quit the stirrups an' take him out of the saddle in a flyin' dive.

Before they get to us, I've handed him a lacin' he won't soon forget. Sure, they give me plenty of the same, handcuff me an' throw me into the saddle, so groggy I don't know the score. I'm just snappin' out of that beatin' when we ride into the stable in Contention.

There that double-crossin' slimy rat, Jeff Mapes, looks me in the eye, denies everything I said, brands me a liar an' a thief who stole his prize Apaluse. It's a big joke to everybody but me, an' I don't count any more than any sucker counts.

♦ ♦ ♦

THE sheriff hauls me down to the jail an' heaves me into a cell. Way I'm feeling, I'm grateful for a cot to stretch out on an' go to sleep. I'm waked up along about dusk by the jailer openin' the cell. He's got a tray of food.

"How are yuh?" he grins. "I'm Spike Stotes, the jailer."

"I'm Calamity Jones, the hard-luck member of the Montana Joneses. I'm fine as chicken teeth. How are you?"

"Just fine," he says, pleasant. "Yes sir, I allus feel fine when I collect my share of the reward paid by the Rancher's Association for the capture of a hawss thief. Five hundred dollars they paid for your arrest. I get twenty-five."

"Little enough. That must strain Caskey's generosity to the limit."

"Ogalalla's all right," he says, loyal. "He don't get but a hundred of it."

"That leaves three seventy-five, where I learned figgers. What comes of that?"

He starts to answer, favors me with a sudden suspicious glance, then freezes up. "Deputies," he grunts. "Ogalalla uses lots of 'em. You should care, anyhow. We find it so long between horse thieves here that we know what to do with 'em when we ketch 'em. I'll get another twenty-five from the county for springin' the hang trap."

He says it scary, but I'm thinkin' about a comparison—lots of valuable ponies stolen an' few rustlers caught. Looks to me like the county's troubles don't lie too far from this jailhouse. If I'm gonna get out of here, it better be before that ugly tempered Ogalalla Caskey starts in on me. . . .

"Jailer," I say, smart, "you've bin runnin' off at the head, guessin' wild an' reckless. But don't you hold your breath until they pay you for droppin' me through a gallows' trap. My, no. You see, you and the sheriff and the other boys who share in the Association reward are just like me—horse thieves who wouldn't last a minute if the true facts was known. Ogalalla knows I know his game, and where he's holdin' those Apalusian ponies too. You don't see him in no hurry to make good his brags about burnin' information out of me, do you? He won't. If he's as wise as I think he is, he'll turn me loose an' make it look like I escaped. He don't want to get too thick with me."

"More likely he'll kill you," he mutters. But I can see he's some impressed an' watchin' me close while I eat.

"Don't be silly," I taunt him as I drain my coffee cup. "Ogalalla won't kill me. Not when he knows that I'm the gent who robbed the bank at Aztec an' that the two thousand dollar reward won't be paid unless the money is returned along with the robber. Ogalalla knows I've got the money buried—but he don't know where."

Boy, does Jailer Spike Stotes swaller that bait! He gulps it; his eyes bug out an' his jaw sags like he was in some holy presence. "How much?" he whispers. "How much you got buried?"

"Thirty thousand in gold," I lie, prompt, "an' I never bothered to count the currency. It's way up yonder, I mean."

"Buried near?"

"Not far from here—six or seven miles mebby. But don't you go pryin' now, because no man's ever gonna know where it's at."

"Not even if a man was to do somethin' big for you?" he insists. "Somethin' like lettin' you outa this here jail?"

"Why should I pay for that? Ogalalla will let me out when he gets ready, and will have me shadowed, figgerin' I'll go to my cache."

"Somethin' I ain't told you," he says, speakin' in a hoarse whisper. "Ogalalla mightn't have nothin' to say about it. The boys is gettin' likkered an' already talkin' hang party. It might be worth somethin' to be scarce when they come for you, eh?"

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THE town's quiet an' I can't tell from Stotes' face if he's lyin' or tippin' me off to somethin' true. I seize on it.

"Is that right!" I gasp. "That's bad, Spike." I grab his hand, clingin'. "I never thought of that. I don't wanta die, feller. Get me outa here an' I'll split my cache with yuh. You'll be fixed for life; never have to work again . . . ."

"It's a deal," he says, an' his eyes glow in the gloom. "Now listen! I'll take this tray back an' get a couple ponies . . . ."

"Get my Glory Hawss and the Apaluse I paid Mapes a hundred good American dollars for . . . ."

"Not a chance," he busts in. "Your personal pony is in Ogalalla's private stable. Hawss an' gear of a ketched thief goes to him. The Apaluse goes to Mapes, who uses it on the next sucker that comes along."

"Nice thing," I mutter. "All done in the name of the law. Well, do the best you can in the way of a pony. Yeah, an' line up a couple of shovels. I caved a cut-bank in on that money. And hurry. Me, I ain't cravin' to have my neck stretched."

"Be right back," he promises, an' quits the jailhouse. As near as a man can, I hold my breath for the next half hour. I feel purty sure Stotes has taken the bait, but I can't help worryin' that he'll somesow say something to Ogalalla that will gum up the play.

It seems hours before the back door of the jail rattles an' Stotes comes in.

"Come on," he whispers, openin' the cell. "We're gone, an' not any too soon, judgin' by what I hear on the street. Step lively."

"How about my gun?" I inquire. "I feel naked thisaway."

"Glad you reminded me," he chuckles,

making his way into the darkened office. "We may need it if anybody follers us. But until we do, I'll keep it on me, just in case you might be hoorawin' me."

I'm disappointed, of course, but I dassent say anything for fear of rousin' his suspicions. We go outside, fork the two fuzzies waitin' there an' ride out of town by back alleys. Ketchin' the trail south, I take the lead, lopin' to'rds a cut-bank coulee I spotted some six miles out —one with some fresh cavin'. An' Spike Stotes lopes at my flank, his hand on his gun an' his eyes never off me. Looks like there just ain't no faith in the man!

After while we hit the gully I noticed comin' in, foller it till I find a fresh cave-down. "This is the place," I tell him, lightin' down. Grab your shovel an' let's go."

I almost drop the shovel I'm pullin' out from under my saddle fender when he says: "I didn't fetch no shovel. Couldn't find another one, which suits me just as well anyway. I've just got a hunch you've dragged me up here on a wild-goose chase. If so, I'm dumpin' your carcass in the hole you dig. Get busy."

An' I know he means it. Probably means it both ways, too—if I turn up the imaginary bank loot or if I don't. Cripes! He sets his horse, makin' it plain he don't intend to light down where I can get a swing at him with my shovel. I'm thinkin' mighty fast, I can tell you, as I take a couple preliminary scoops. Spike says over the horn, watchin' me, an' that's my cue to let the third shovel full of dry dust go straight up at him.

It takes him square in the face, straightenin' him up an' almost liftin' him out of the saddle. I follow in with the uplifted shovel, but his pony rears an' I miss him.

"You double-crossin' snake!" he bawls, clawin' at his blinded eyes with one hand an' swishin' out the gun with the other. He starts blazin' away, wild an' reckless, an' I do a fancy squaw-dance step fadin' away from the line of his swingin' gun. His scairt horse does a pivot, puttin' Spike's back to me, an' I ain't one not to answer opportunity's loud knock.

I reach the jailer with a full swing of the shovel. The crash sounds like somebody steppin' on a settin' of eggs. Spike take off, sails out of the saddle an' lands all spraddled out like a sack full of coyote baits. I don't even bother to go look at him; I'm that sure he's cashed in his last white chip.

Makin' a leap for the pistol he dropped, I holster it, catch my pony and light out for Contention. I know it's a bad place for my health, but I ain't leavin' here without Glory an' Apaluse, or a fight. Imagine that affectionate Glory Hawss in the hands of a brute like Ogalalla!

* * *

BACK in Contention, I tie my pony in a brushy lot an' find the sheriff's house from an obligin' citizen, then slink out back to the stable. Horses are snortin' an' grindin' hay inside, but the place is closed tight an' padlocked. I'm tryin' to figger out how to bust in, when a swift gallopin' pony comes racin' into the yard.

A rider gets off, staggers to the porch, cryin': "Ogalalla! Ogalalla! For God's sake . . . !"

The door flashes open. A beam of light strikes a weavin', bloody man. It's Spike Stotes, the jailer whose head I thought I smashed flat. Holy cow! They grab him an' whisk him inside. An' I flatten myself against the house, listenin' while he confesses the whole game him an' me played durin' the evening, includin' all the lies I fed him in the jail.

Ogalalla shakes the house with his pacin', rattlin' the walls with his cussin'. At times I think he's gonna kill the miserable jailer. Then sudden fear touches him with a greater urgency than his rage.

"By godfrey!" he yells. "What we dallyin' here for? No tellin' what that feller knows. Before we look for him, we better move them hot Apalusians, just in case he has found the hole-up. Come on. You too, Spike. I don't care how bad you feel, I'll teach you to free a prisoner of mine."

They come rushin' outside, seven of 'em, countin' Spike. Ogalalla opens the stable an' they throw saddles on the horses. A few minutes later, the sheriff leads them away at a hard gallop, spurring my Glory Hawss. If I wasn't playin' for bigger stakes, I'd have shot him the first roll of his spur. As it is, I sprint for

my waitin' pony, fork him an' light out after the renegade sheriff an' his mates.

• • •

THE moon is up an' I have a hard time keeping them in sight without exposing myself to possible discovery. I'm laggin' almost a half mile behind them when some sixth sense warns me that I too am being follered. Not so good if Ogalalla played it smart an' dropped a man in the brush to trap me. But if so, why did he let me pass without blastin' me out of the picture?

Worried, I dip down into a swale, rein hard right an' pull my pony to a stop in the shadows of a big cottonwood. It means maybe losin' that gang of thieves, but better that than my head. After a few minutes, two riders pop over the rise an' come lopin' into the bottom. In the bright moonlight, it's easy to make 'em out. In the lead is Spittin' Bob Bangs, breeder of fancy Apalusians. Behind him is the same silent buckaroo who rode with him the time they intercepted Ogalalla an' his posse bringin' me to jail.

"Bangs!" I holler, an' them two pretty near bust their arms, draggin' their cutters. "Lay off them guns, because you won't need 'em! An' I've got the drop on you if you still think you do. Hands up!"

They elevate an' I walk into the clear, coverin' 'em.

"Jones—the hawss thief!" gasps Bangs, spittin' through his fingers. "I heard Spike Stotes tell the sandy you ran on him. What you want?"

"Then you must have been keepin' cases on Ogalalla," I counter. "Gettin' suspicious, were you?"

"Plenty, Jones. An' a little listenin' at one of his windows paid off big tonight, providin' you don't hold me here till I lose his trail."

"Three is better'n one, when they think alike," I tell him, and run for my pony. "The three of us, coupled with Old Man Surprise, should be able to beard them rustlers in their lair, as the feller said. Now here's something mebbe you didn't know . . . ."

As we ride along, having picked up Ogalalla's riders again, I tell him about the game this crooked gang is playin', with Jeff Mapes profitin' from an occasional sucker at the feed barn. It opens his eyes.

"Never could figger that tight-wad payin' me five hundred dollars for that colt. An' I should have got wise that something was wrong, because this is the third time the critter was stolen an' some feller jailed for it. But they played it pretty slick, allus giving me trouble of my own to occupy my mind. You know, Jones, it wasn't until you taken Ogalalla out of the saddle an' whupped him for abusin' his pony that I really ever suspicioned the man. I remarked to Buck here, at the time, that Caskey acted like the horse thief and you like the gentleman. That was the start of Ogalalla's downfall. If I get my stock back, I'll see you don't lose . . . ."

"See that I don't lose that Glory Hawss of mine," I finish for him. "That's all I ask. Sa-a-ay . . . ." The horseman ahead are suddenly gone, like they was swallowed up. "Did you see what I saw?"

"Looked to me," says Spittin' Bob, "that they rode square into that cliff yonder."

"They sure did," I argue, "or my eyes is playin' tricks. Keep your caps ready for a crackin', an' slide up quiet an' easy."

• • •

WARY, watchful an' spread wide, we approach the spot where the riders vanished. There we find a fold in the cliff face, with a canyon coming out at a sharp angle. It's a narrow slot that looks like nothin' more than a crack in the cliff until you get right up to it. The stream, splashin' throught it, is swallowed by the sandy ground within a hundred feet. A perfectly hid entrance to a rustler hideaway.

"Reckon they might have a guard in here?" asks Bangs, waverin'.

"You gonna let it make any diff?" I counter. "This is a fight we're goin' into, mister, an' I don't want it no other way. You've got a bigger stake than me here, an' it's your bet."

He laughs, nervous. "Old age got me for just a second, son. Sure I'm stayin', an' raisin' you six. Come on."

He leads the way, then me, then close-

lipped Buck. Our guns are up and ready. Seems like that cold, dark vault is a mile long, though it can't be over a quarter. The ponies pick their way slow an' careful for mebby fifteen minutes. Then, suddenly, the walls are drawin' back, openin' into a broad, moon bathed meadow, lush with grass an' shadowed with clumps of willow. If there's any cabins, I can't see 'em. An' anyway they don't matter, because Ogalalla an' his men are spread out across the meadow, whoopin' up a herd of grazin' horses, hazin' 'em down to'rds us.

"In five minutes them ponies will be crowdin' through here," says Spittin' Bob, studious. "We could turn 'em back, but just what would that buy us?"

"If we let 'em through," I warn him, "an' take to them rustlers, which I aim to do up to an' includin' gettin' my Glory Hawss back, the shootin' may scatter 'em from hell to breakfast. Suppose we bust the broncs back into the faces of them wide loopers an' feed 'em a batch of lead while they're disorganized. An' Ogalalla's mine."

That's the way it's left. The three of us plant our ponies abreast across the narrow neck of the outlet, hidden in the shadows of the walls. We wait till the stolen Apalusians come streakin' through the down barb wire gate, then at a word from me we spur straight at 'em, hollerin' an' yellin'.

The leaders plow to a stop, whirl an' recoil upon the others. Dust boils high, shuttin' out the details. With the herd turned and breakin' swift along the margin of the meadow, I rowel my pony into the midst of the wheeling brutes. The current of hawssflesh carries me along. With the dust falling behind, I glimpse three-four riders like ghosts, charging along to cut off the herd, swingin' their quirts.

Thin echoes of their howled curses come driftin' through the thunder of hoofbeats. An' it's then I see Ogalalla Caskey. He's out of control, fightin' Glory with quirt an' spur. The critter, never havin' been treated thataway, is fightin' back, buckin', spinnin', springin' like a goat an' poundin' the ground pretty.

I bust out of the ruck, cussin', an' take to'rds him. Ogalalla spots me comin', hollers something about gettin' a rope on his plungin' brute. "You started it, Caskey!" I yell. "Now finish it. If that horse piles you now, he'll stomp you to death."

I'm not a rod away from him, so close I can see his eyes widen as he recognizes me. His face contorts. He hooks his rawls into the cinch, grabs the horn with his left hand an' whips out his gun. I don't reckon he could hit the broad side of a barn from the inside, the kind of a ride Glory's givin' him—but a man can't bet his life on no theory like that.

We fire about the same time. I don't know what went wrong with his bullet, but mine takes him in the brisket. He drops his gun, clutches at his midde an' joins the birds. When he lights, he don't move.

Glory goes pitchin' across the flat, me after him. I catch his rein an' talk like a good one before I can soothe his injured feelin's. I've just got him stopped an' have forked him gingerly, when I'm conscious of gunblasts an' yells not far off, an' of swift hoofbeats a lot nearer than that. I spin Glory on a dime to face the chargin' rider.

★ ★ ★

AT FIRST I think it's Buck, until he hollers: "Tensleep Maxon, you dirty meddlin' crook!"

"Jeff Mapes!" I yell back. "The pot callin' the kettle black!"

"Here's payoff for Ogalalla!" he howls.

"Here's value received from a sucker!" I answer, movin' to'rds him.

He's on the Apaluse I bought an' paid for. An' it's with thoughts of not injurin' that purty hawss that I give the crooked stableman first shot. He breaks aside with a cruel jerk of the bit, crackin' a cap. The slug burns along my left arm, inside. Two inches one way would have busted my arm; two inches the other would have found my heart. It was too close—but as close as Mapes will ever get. My bullet takes him in the neck, knockin' him back over the rump of his pony.

Down near the neck of the draw it's two against five. But it's three against four when I come pilin' in behind the rampagin' rustlers with my gun blazin'. Spittin' Bob charges with a yell, his gun

talkin' turkey. The odds are even then, an' these buzzards don't like it that salty.

They break an' run for it, an' I let 'em go.

Buck is grinnin', dabbin' at an ugly bullet cut across his cheek. "Nice goin', feller!" he says. "Yo're wuss'n a shebobcat with pups when it comes to a fight, ain't yuh?"

Spittin' Bob's left arm is hangin' limp an' his sleeve is red. But his eyes are sparklin' as he watches the ponies he had long given up as lost.

"Wouldn't have give five cents for my chance of ever seein' them colts again, Tensleep," he says, fervent.

"Hold on, Bangs," I protest, trying to look puzzled. "What's this Tensleep business? It's what Jeff Mapes just called me when he tried to blast me down."

His eyes fasten on me as if to look plumb through. "Surprise, eh, son? I reckon Ogalalla Caskey hadn't got around to tellin' you, but he found out who you was an' sent out some telegrams to line up the various bounties on your pelt. But outside of me an' Buck, I doubt if there'll be anybody left around here that could make trouble for you. I'd admire to make a place for you on my horse ranch. I can use a man who loves good horses the way you do. Can you see it that way?"

I shake my head. "Thanks, Mister Bangs, but I reckon I wouldn't be satisfied as long as there's any untracked trails."

"I understand," he says, rueful. "I was that way once myownself." He suddenly looks old an' bleak. "Well, take one of them Apalusians, boy. You earned it."

"Thanks some more," I say, warm an' grateful. "But a man in my position dassent have too many ponies, particularly too many flashy ones. It's good to know you'd trust me with one. So long, my friend. Glad we got your ponies back. I'll be seein' you, mebby. Adios!"

Them two lift their hands as I lope out the bottleneck with my Apaluse scuddin' ahead of me. Yep, honest ponies come most gosh-awful high, but they sure are a satisfaction unto a man's soul.

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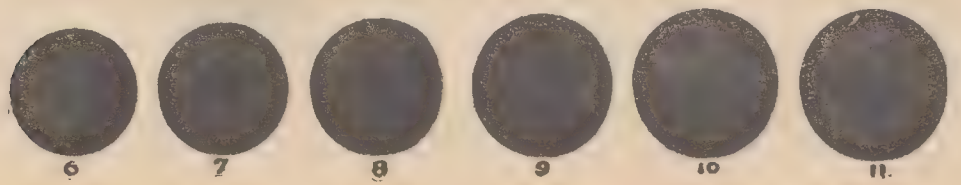

A NEW HAND

Ben was shooting fast at the skulking figures. . . .

Stirring novelette of an outcast trail-boss

By CLIFF FARRELL

Only a bred-in-the-bone Texas trail-boss like Ben Brackett would ride a thousand twisted miles to hunt for the phantom beef herd he was supposed to have stolen, and to meet, face-to-face, the embittered cow-folks whose son, they swore, Ben had ruthlessly murdered.

CHAPTER ONE

Bullets Buy Beef

RAIN dripped from the spruce and pine timber, melting the scattered patches of weather-soiled snow left over from winter. Fog hugged the shaggy flank of Chain Mountain, pooling soddenly in the canyons, drifting like smoke through the wet alderbrush on the ridges.

It was the kind of day when the sound of a gunshot could be heard far away.

For that reason, Ben Brackett determined to make his kill with his lariat. He shot the loop low, and rolled it on the front legs of the running steer. He busted the animal so that it pitchpoled, and he heard its neck break as it went over. It was a trick he had learned from the brown-faced vaqueros on the Mexican Border, a thousand miles away.

The steer, which carried a Circle Cross 8 brand, was dead when he bent over it.

for MAN-BREAK RANCH

on his spare and rawboned frame. Long-jawed, blunt-chinned, his face had the grainy cast of a man who had recently traveled far, or had undergone more than the usual hardships of a working cowboy.

No other sound except the soft, liquid drip of rain came out of the drifting fog. Ben Brackett got busy again, working fast. Using axe and knife, he slashed and hacked away the haunch from which he had peeled the brand. He dragged the quarter through the brush, rolled it into a coulee and tossed dead branches over it. After which he spent ten minutes sifting pine needles to cover his faint trail.

Fetching a skinning knife and small axe from his horse, he swiftly cut the brand from the left haunch. He cleaned the piece of hide in wet snow and rolled it in a scrap of canvas, then stuffed it in the inner pouch of his slicker.

His head lifted as the faint report of a rifle shot drifted through the murky day. There was no way of telling from what direction it came, but he knew how fog would carry a sound, and he judged that the gun had been fired a mile or more away.

He stood motionless as an Indian for minute after minute, listening. His slicker, weathered to a neutral hue, hung slackly

Nobody would know that he had peeled the brand from that dead steer. He wanted whoever found the dismembered carcass to believe it was the work of a meat rustler.

He returned to his waiting horse, and was coiling his rope when he heard the faint rustle of brush behind him.

He whirled, instinctively diving aside as gun-flame streaked through the fog. The bullet fanned the collar of his slicker.

He zig-zagged just in time, for two more slugs tore into the pine needles at his feet.

He jerked out his six-shooter and held his fire for an instant. Then he made out the face of a flat-nosed, stringly-haired man squatting in the alders shooting at him.

Ben Brackett fired twice and heard the crunch as one slug found its target. He watched the man pitch forward on his face out of the brush into the open. He kept his cocked gun ready to shoot again as he walked toward the yellow slicker-covered man. But another bullet was not necessary.

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BLOOD was spurting from a bullet hole in the front of the victim's slicker. He lay there looking up at Ben Brackett, trying to lift a hand as though to push the tall, gaunt-cheeked man back.

"B-Brackett!" he gasped. "Judas! I seen you dead once. I helped throw your carcass into the Platte River more'n six months ago."

"Maybesq you're lookin' at a ghost, Bealer," Ben Brackett nodded. "I didn't figure on punchin' out your ticket today, but as long as the cards ran that way it'll have to ride. You were on my list anyway, along with Spider Durkin, Jinglebob and Roan Jenkins."

Jake Bealer managed to lift his head and look at the dismembered steer nearby. "So you know," he breathed haltingly. "I hope one o' the boys gits you before you git all of 'em—damn you!"

And Jake Bealer was dead, lying there looking at Ben Brackett with fixed resentment in his glazed eyes.

Ben found Bealer's horse back in the timber. He heaved the body across the saddle, lashed it down, and sent the animal away with a slap of his hand. Jake Bealer certainly deserved to be left for the coyotes and buzzards to worry over, but that wasn't Ben Brackett's way.

Ben's eyes were the same color as the fog as he rode away, and his lips were white. He could still hear the crunch of that bullet in Bealer's body.

The steady rain was forming rivulets in every draw and water course on the mountainside. He followed these temporary streams, knowing they would wash out his trail. There was a Circle Cross 8 line camp up toward the pass, and he headed away from it. He remembered the distant rifleshot and guessed that it was this sound that had brought Jake Bealer down from the camp to investigate.

Ben crossed a ridge, and descended the rough flank of a big canyon toward a sizeable stream. He pulled up suddenly, looking at a long scuff mark in a patch of slushy snow.

Forcing the horse up the slope he found the dismembered carcass of a dead steer, much like the one he had left more than a mile the other side of the ridge. The animal had been killed by a rifle bullet. The left haunch quarter, which had borne the brand, was missing.

"Good day for meat hunters," he murmured drily.

The quarter of beef had been dragged downhill to an old logging trail which wound precariously along the canyonside. There he found the wheelmarks of a light wagon, which had been drawn by a shod team.

Boot tracks showed also in the yellow mud. The marks were small, made either by a boy, or—more likely—by a woman. The sign showed that the wagon had been driven up the canyon to this point, and had turned back to retrace its journey.

Ben avoided the trail, side-hilling the mountain until, after a mile, he sighted the lurching ranch wagon on the rough road below. A small figure—either a boy or a woman, Ben judged—muffled in a black pancho and range hat, was tooling the team over the narrow, slippery trail at a dangerous pace.

Cutting across the neck of the ridges, Ben pulled well ahead of the wagon. Presently impassable ledges forced him to descend to the trail where it forded to the north side of the cayon.

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HE studied the ford before attempting it. He had crossed this same stream about daybreak at this point. The water had been only knee deep on the horse at that time. But because of the steady rain the creek was rising fast,

and swirling in a muddy torrent, it had widened to a hundred feet.

A distance below the ford the canyon narrowed, and the creek plunged into a stretch of spray-torn rapids. A man or animal unlucky enough to be swept into that gorge would never come out alive.

Ben's dun was a good water horse and it tackled the crossing gamely. But the current was swifter than Ben had expected and they were swept downstream before the dun found footing on the north shore, and heaved out like a wet cat.

Ben pulled off into the brush and waited. He was thinking of the oncoming wagon. The rig must have forded the stream on its trip up the mountain. But could it make the crossing now, with the ford deeper and more dangerous?

After a minute or two the wagon swung in sight, driven by a young woman. The poncho covered her to the chin, and the rain-sodden hat drooped low over her worried, amber-colored eyes. A tendrill of wet hair, the hue of tanned buckskin, had escaped from beneath the hat-brim, and was plastered in a tight curl on her forehead.

She rose to her feet, staring anxiously at the ford. Then she flicked the whip and sent the team at the stream with a rush. Her mouth was set in a do-or-die expression.

The sorrel team floundered in panic when they hit swimming water. The wagon floated free on its calked, water-tight box, and the current twirled it downstream like a chip.

The girl again came to her feet, and tried to repress a scream as she saw the rapids. Her piquant face was ashen; Ben knew that she realized she was face to face with death.

The wagon struck a submerged boulder and tilted violently, throwing her off balance. In an instant she was floundering desperately in the white, churning water.

Snatching up his lariat, Ben left the saddle and raced along the margin of the stream, spreading his loop. He saw the girl's head pop from the muddy water downstream. She was clinging to the reins, and struggling to swim, but her legs were tangled in the poncho.

"Hang on!" Ben yelled.

He waded into the stream to his waist. With the current clutching at him, he sent the loop sailing across the water. It settled over the head of one of the sorrels, but before he could brace his feet the jerk came, and he was dragged away.

He went under, conscious of being swept a dozen dizzy yards downstream, still clinging to the rope. Suddenly he brought up against a submerged boulder. He braced his legs against it and the rope tightened.

The girl, clinging to the reins, was dangling in the current below the wagon, with the rapids only a stone's toss beyond. But the rope halted the drifting outfit.

Slowly the current swung the horses inshore just as Ben felt his feet slipping. He clawed desperately for leverage, managed to hang on until the sorrels found footing. The animals lunged trembling into shallow water and up on a gravel bar, dragging the wagon with them.

But the girl had lost her grip on the reins just as her feet found bottom. She stood poised there, battling the current as it pulled her relentlessly back.

Ben half-dove, half-swam toward her; and he was within arm's length of her when he saw her carried away, her long hair floating out around her like a shawl. With a last desperate lunge, Ben wound his fingers in her hair.

For a moment it was touch and go as to whether both of them would be carried into the rapids. Then he dug in his toes, and inched back out of the sucking force of the current.

Panting, he dragged her toward him, lifted her in his arms, and floundered ashore.

CHAPTER TWO

Vengeance Ranch

THE girl was too spent to move. She fainted dead away in Ben's arms when she realized she was safe. Her head drooped back, and the rain accented the satiny grace of her softly tanned throat. Freckles dusted across the bridge of her slightly tilted nose, and her lips were full and soft.

Ben laid her beside a boulder which shielded her from the rain. He led the team and wagon back to the trail. Then, lifting the tarp in the wagon bed, he found

a quarter of fresh beef, wrapped in clean grain sacks. The hide was still on the haunch, and bore the Circle Cross 8.

An axe, skinning knife and rifle lay beneath the wagon seat. Ben smiled grimly as he thought of Jake Bealer, and of the danger to anyone found with beef-stealing evidence on them. He lugged the haunch of beef and skinning tools back into the brush, hiding them in a clump of bullberry brush.

The girl revived after he returned to her side. Ben stripped off her boots and poncho, and her soaked mackinaw. Her woollen shirt and heavy riding skirt clung soddenly to her as he fetched his soogan and slicker tarp and wrapped her up, then lifted her to the wagon seat. Soaked to the skin himself, he could feel the knifing thrust of the dismal wind.

"Where's the nearest house?" he asked. "You need a fire and warm blankets."

Her teeth were chattering as she glanced anxiously at the tarp in the wagon bed. But Ben had tossed it back in place and it lay humped up, so there was no sign that quarter of beef had been removed. That seemed to lift a weight from her mind.

"I live two miles or so down the mountain," she said shakily. "You ought to wring my neck! Look at you—soaked like a drowned rat. And all on my account!"

Ben tied his horse to the wagon tail, mounted beside her and sent the team down the rain-swept mountain road.

"Are you working for one of the outfits around here?" she asked. "For Moss Kern at the Circle Cross 8? This is all his range."

Ben shook his head. "I was just drift-in' through."

That plainly pleased her. She huddled against him, insisting on sharing the soogan and tarp with him. "You came within an ace of going into the rapids with me," she said. "A debt like that is hard to pay Mister—"

"Cain," Ben said. "Bill Cain."

She directed him up a ranch road, and they presently pulled into the yard of a big spread. Before them stood a rambling, square-log house, a bunkhouse large enough to sleep a score of riders, and an imposing scatter of barns and corrals. It was plain that this had once been the heart of a sizeable outfit. But now the bunkhouse was boarded up. A melting snowdrift lingered in the main corral, vacant and lonely in the rain. The barns seemed deserted and forlorn.

"This," the girl said, with stiff-lipped pride, as Ben lifted her down, "is my father's ranch, the Anchor 9."

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A GAUNT-SHOULDERED man with a gray-streaked longhorn mustache came hurrying from the big house. His lined face and prominent features told of a man who had once known power, but whose ambitions and hopes were now clearly in the past.

He looked at the dripping girl, then his eyes turned fiercely to Ben as he started to speak.

"Hold on, Dad," the girl exclaimed. "Bill Cain isn't from Moss Kern's outfit. And he's just pulled the wagon and me out of the Elk Creek gorge. What we need now is a roaring fire and dry clothes. My knees are playing Hail Columbia, and my teeth are doing a rattlebone accompaniment. And Bill Cain isn't exactly suffering from the heat."

She led the way into the house, and her father followed, still eyeing Ben with latent suspicion. They entered a massive ranch room, more than thirty feet long, adorned with game trophies, Indian blankets and buffalo robes. Here, plainly, was the evidence of a glory that was gone.

A log fire blazed on a big stone hearth. The girl and Ben were kneeling before it, thawing the numbness out of their bodies, when the rancher brought in Ben's warsack. He led him to a rear room where, as he changed quickly to dry levis and shirt, he could hear the girl changing in another room.

When Ben returned to the big room, the rancher had gone out to take care of the team and Ben's horse. Alone for the moment, Ben walked to the center table, attracted by a photograph, mounted in a massive hammered silver frame.

His eyes had a shocked, hunted look as he gazed at it, then carried it to the window for better light.

Abruptly he whirled at a soft sound behind him, and was facing the girl who must have entered a moment before. Her

damp hair was still down, hanging in waves, and she had donned a gingham print dress. She was taller than he had first believed, firm-breasted, and lithe.

"It's my brother," she told him quietly. "Clem Jewell. I'm Ruth Jewell. My father's front name is Hack."

Ben returned the picture to the table. "It's easy to see the resemblance," he said briefly.

"I—I was hoping you might have known Clem," she sighed as she spread her hair, drying it before the fire. "Before—before he died . . . "

"He's dead? I'm sorry."

"It would have helped if we could have —have at least found his body," she said huskily. "He was murdered last summer somewhere along the Platte River. He was only twenty-two, and the shock of it killed my mother. We buried her last winter. And it's killing dad too, just as surely. His whole life was wrapped up in Clem."

Ben was grateful that the shadows concealed his expression. "How did it happen?"

"Dad sent him down to Ogallala to buy feeder beef," she said. "The market was glutted with Texas cattle at that time and steers were cheap. We had been having tough luck up here. It looked like a chance to clean up by holding cattle over the winter, fattening them on northern grass, and selling them early next season before Texas beef came on the market again.

"We got a letter from Clem saying he had bought fifteen hundred head of feeders and had hired a Texas cowboy named Ben Brackett to take charge. Clem had no experience with trail herds, and his letter said that Ben Brackett knew his business.

"That was the last word we ever got from Clem. We waited two months and the herd didn't show up. Dad went to Ogallala and learned that the herd had pulled out on schedule. After that it seemed to have vanished—completely disappeared without a trace.

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SHE sighed, staring into the fire. "Dad searched the country, but winter had arrived by that time, and he finally had to give up. Others who had come up the trail told us that this wasn't the first time a crooked trail boss had killed the owner and made off with the herd. Later on a chuckline rider named Jake Bealer showed up at the ranch in mid-winter looking for work. When he learned our name he told us the story.

"Jake Bealer was one of the riders with the herd when it left Ogallala. Clem had hired him, but Ben Brackett had hired the other three men, who were tough, gunfighters. Not long after they left Ogallala, Ben Brackett murdered Clem in cold blood. And he murdered the cook, who was an honest man, too. He would have killed Bealer, but Bealer managed to escape. Bealer's horse broke a leg in that escape, and he was nearly killed, but he hid out for days. Though Brackett and his pals hunted for him, he managed to tough it through. Later on, Bealer was picked up by a wagon train bound for Miles City."

She glanced up as her father entered, and lighted the lamp.

He nodded confirmation. "I had borrowed on every hoof and horn and every inch of graze I owned to raise the cash to pay for that beef herd," he told Ben heavily. "But I lost it all when that herd was stolen. Moss Kern, damn him, bought up all my short-term notes, and then sold me into bankruptcy last winter. He's been after my scalp for years, and now he's got it."

Hack Jewell's voice was old, discour-

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aged. "We might have fought Moss Kern off an' got back on our feet," he went on, "if Clem had managed to get that herd through . . . Kern owns the Circle Cross 8. That brand covers most any kind of a cow-mark another man can make. And his crew are experts in the use of a runnin' iron. They been whittlin' me for five years, crowdin' me with gun-slingers and shyster lawyers. A blizzard helped cut me down to the nub a couple of years ago, and that stolen feeder herd was the final blow. All we own now is this ranch spread. I homesteaded the land it stands on, or Moss Kern would have taken that too.

"If you ever cut this Ben Brackett's sign, Cain, I'd consider it a favor if you sent word where I can pick up his trail. When I find him I'll make him give head to everything that happened. Then I'll gut-shoot him."

"Any way of knowing this Ben Brackett if I should happen to run across him?" Ben asked.

"The way Bealer described Brackett he was a six-footer about your age, but thirty-forty pounds heavier. An' younger; about twenty-five. Dark, bay-colored hair and blue-gray eyes."

"A thousand men might answer that description."

"That's the hell of it," Hack Jewell admitted.

"What happened to Jake Bealer?" Ben asked casually.

"Bealer's workin' for Moss Kern," Hack Jewell shrugged. Any man who wants cow work in this country has to work for Kern. There ain't any other outfits big enough to hire riders."

Ben watched both Hack Jewell and the amber-eyed girl narrowly. He decided they had no suspicion they were talking to the man they had branded murderer of their own flesh and blood; the killer who had ruined both their ranch and all they lived by.

CHAPTER THREE

Death's Brand

BEN slid into his slicker and hat which were steaming in the heat of the fireplace.

"B'noches," he said shortly.

"You're not riding tonight?" the girl protested. "Not in this weather? It's getting worse outside."

"I figure on makin' Barrville tonight," he nodded. "It can't be more'n half a dozen miles."

He wanted to get away from the haunted eyes of Hack Jewell, and from this girl whose lips were so soft and winsome in the lamplight. And from the picture of that dead cowboy on the table.

Ruth Jewell pulled on a slicker and brought a lantern to the saddling shed while he repacked his warbag and rolled his bed tarp. She held out her hand as he saddled up. "I won't forget what you did there at the ford," she said softly, looking at him.

"That haunch of beef you took from one of Moss Kern's steers up in the timber is hid out in a bullberry thicket about a hundred yards off the trail this side of the ford," he said.

She stared, startled. Then she laughed shakily. "And all the time I was thinking it must have fallen out of the wagon while we were in the creek," she said. "Just why did you hide it? Or don't you know that Moss Kern has offered five hundred dollars reward, dead or alive, for anyone caught slow-elking any of his beef?"

"Don't touch that piece of beef," Ben said. "At least until sure you won't be caught with it. Before long you'll understand why I'm warning you. Later on, you might hunt it up, and scrape down the underneath side of the brand. Notice if it had worn another brand in the past."

She thought it over. "I killed that steer because—well, because we're hungry. That's the cold truth. We've lived on short rations lately. The Jewell family's down to rock bottom and—and we're not exactly the begging sort. We've got to live off the country until Dad can line up something, or I can find a job slinging hash in town. I've got some promises along that line. That beef—it wasn't like stealing. Not really. Why, Moss Kern has rustled more beef from us in the past than an army could eat. But you don't know what you're asking when you warn me against staying clear of that hunk of grub. Honestly, I could eat it raw and without salt!"

She was talking lightly, but Ben realized she was in dead earnest. And he could understand now how a girl as womanly as Ruth Jewell could go up on a storm-swept mountain and singled-handed kill and butcher a steer. This girl had an unconquerable fighting spirit.

"Better to go hungry a little longer than see your father strung up on a tree limb," Ben told her. "I happen to know that the Circle Cross 8 is on the prowl for beef rustlers. The way I get it, Moss Kern is out to drive you folks out of this range entirely. Why isn't he satisfied, now that he's got your range?"

She smiled wryly. "Perhaps you've heard there's no fury as great as that of a woman scorned. Well, that old proverb works both ways. Men don't like to be scorned either."

"I savvy," Ben nodded. "You?"

She blew out the lantern, but not until Ben saw the swift tide of color flood her cheeks. Yet her acknowledgement was blunt enough. "Moss Kern has an idea he wants to marry me, and I wouldn't have him if he was gold-plated and set with diamonds!" She laughed a little. "I hit him over the head with the weighted end of a quirt the last time he asked me. Then he promised that he'd tame me like he'd tame a spoiled horse. That's why he isn't satisfied merely with whittling us down by slow starvation. What brand do you bet I'll find under Moss Kern's Circle Cross 8 on that piece of slow elk, Mister Mysterious Bill Cain?"

Ben swung into the saddle. "Maybeso the same brand I expect to find burned under Kern's iron on a piece of steerhide I picked up today," he remarked.

"Hold on a minute!" she exclaimed, her hand on his arm. "You've got my curiosity up to the busting point. You can't ride away and let me get wrinkles under my eyes worrying about what you meant. You've got to tell me more!"

• • •

BEN silenced her with a muttered word of warning. Then he twisted in the saddle, listening to the rush of hoofs. Riders pounded through the mud into the ranch yard. The lamplight from the windows glinted on the wet slickers and slouch hats of half a dozen or more men who swung down at the door.

"Surround the house," a biting voice commanded. "Shoot to kill if the old fool tries to git away." Then he lifted a shout. "Come out of there, Jewell, with your hands in the air."

Hack Jewell's shadow appeared at a window. "What the hell you up to, Moss Kern?" he bellowed.

"Come out," Moss Kern yelled, "an' take what's comin' to you. We found the beef you slaughtered up near the pass. An' Jake Bealer's horse brought his body back to the line camp with your bullet through his brisket. We know damned well you done it. You're the only one that would slow-elk my beef on a day like this."

The lamp went out in the house. "I don't savvy what kind of a sandy you're tryin' to run on me now, Kern," Hack Jewell shouted furiously, "but if you're tryin' to say I shot Jake Bealer, you lie, an' you know you lie! Pull out of my ranch yard before I spray you with a scattergun."

Moss Kern's answer was a blast from his six-shooter that smashed the glass from a window, and hammered at the door.

"Knock down that door with lead, boys," Kern roared.

Half a dozen guns opened up on the door. Ben could hear bullets smashing at the latch. He pushed Ruth Jewell away. The saddle shed was open at both ends, and the way was clear for her to escape into the brush.

"Run," he told her. "Stay clear of this." He turned and stepped to the door. Drawing his six-shooter, he fired a shot over the heads of the Circle Cross 8 men.

"You're bayin' the wrong tree, Kern," he shouted. "I'm the man who sent Jake Bealer to hell. Not Hack Jewell."

The gun attack on the house suddenly broke off as Moss Kern uttered an amazed oath. There was momentary silence while the invaders, almost invisible in the black night, tried to locate the direction from which Ben's voice had come.

"Who the hell said that?" Kern bawled. "Who are you?"

"Spider Durkin, who's there with you tonight, should remember my voice," Ben

said brittlely. I saw that turkey-buzzard against the window before Hack darkened the house. And that mule-eared snake they call Jinglebob and Roan Jenkins are likely present too. You know who's talkin' to you Spider. And I reckon you savvy that I'm tellin' the truth when I say it was me that shot Jake Bealer today—an' you know why I shot him. It was a fair fight, and he spilled the first lead. Hack Jewell had nothin' to do with it."

"Git him," the hoarse voice of Spider Durkin screeched frantically. "By Gawd, it's him! Did you hear him, Roan—Jinglebob? It's *him* I tell yuh! An' he's alive!"

Durkin opened up with a six-shooter, firing toward the saddle shed as he located Ben's position. More guns joined in, the flashes lighting up the rain-swept ranch yard, revealing the slicker-clad Circle Cross 8 crew.

◆ ◆ ◆

BEN dropped flat and began shooting back. He lined up a bull-necked figure in the crimson flash of guns, and triggered twice. Out in the ranch yard a man reeled and sprawled on his face in the mud.

Spider Durkin cursed shrilly. "He got Roan. Kill him! Kill him!"

Bullets were showering Ben with mud, and smashing into the log walls of the shed.

At his elbow another six-shooter opened up. It was Ruth Jewell. Ben had taken it for granted that she had heeded his order to retreat through the back of the dark shed into the timber. Instead, she was there at his side, risking her life in the face of the storm of lead that came their way, shooting at the gun flashes in the ranchyard.

"Get out of this, you little fool!" Ben panted. "Take to the brush. This is my personal fight. Stay clear of it."

He rose up before her, shielding her with his body as he pushed her back. A bullet slapped him in the side then, with the force of a battering ram, sending him reeling against her.

The girl choked back a sob of dismay, realizing he had been hit. And she opened fire again at the shadowy, advancing figures.

A billow of flame leaped from the ranch house window and a charge of buckshot screamed through the darkness. A man uttered a yelp of pain as Hack Jewell's war cry arose from the house, and his sawed-off shotgun thundered again.

Moss Kern and his men, caught in a cross-fire, gave up the fight. Cursing, shooting wildly, they stampeded away, and Ben saw that two of them were carrying Roan Jenkin's body with them.

Hack Jewell's shotgun boomed once more, and a load of shot rattled through the timber. The pound of hoofs arose as the Circle Cross 8 crew scattered, and spurred away.

"We'll come back," Moss Kern's voice, thick with fury, came faintly. "An' when we do, we'll level this damned place down to the last log!"

Ben lowered his empty gun and fought the numbness that paralyzed his muscles. He leaned against the door frame and felt blood, wet and warm, soaking the side of his shirt.

The girl found him in the darkness. "Where did it hit you?" she demanded breathlessly.

"It's—it's only a graze!" But Ben's voice was shaky.

She touched him, and her fingers encountered the blood.

"Let me take you to the house," she cried.

"I can ride all right," Ben said between set teeth. "The house would only be a trap for me. And I don't want you or your father to get any deeper into this thing. Moss Kern will come for me, now that they know it was me that killed Jake Bealer. You understand now why I hid that slow-elk you took today. I'd done a little slow-elking myself—but not exactly because I was hungry. Moss Kern and those other men I mentioned have a damned good reason to get me before they come after your father."

Ben fought off a sickening gust of nausea. The numbness was fading from his body, and was succeeded by a blinding thrust of agony. He was, he realized, hit harder than he wanted Ruth Jewell to know.

(Continued on page 100)

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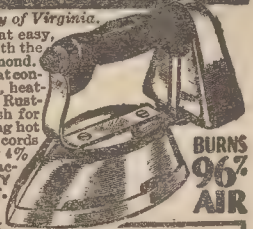

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(Continued from page 98)

SHE caught him as he reeled drunkenly, and eased him to a mound of hay. Her father came cautiously from the house now, and spoke her name.

"Light the lantern, Dad," she ordered. "Put it in the box stall where the light won't be seen outside. Bill Cain jumped in front of me and took a bullet that I would have stopped. That's the second time today he's saved my scalp. Fetch the medicine kit from the house, and bring that clean sheet off my bed for bandages."

"I'll take care of myself," Ben protested.

She ignored his protests. While her father held the lantern, shielding its light, she made a hurried examination.

"You've got a hole in you just below the ribs," she said bluntly as she worked. "It might only have torn through the muscles, but men have died from letting wounds like that go. Dad, I'm taking him up to the old cave in Sawpit Canyon—the one that Clem and I used as our secret hide-out when we were kids. Bill Cain needs looking after. Saddle up a horse for me while I get a camp pack ready. Do you think you can tough it out for a few miles, Bill Cain?"

"I can ride. There's no need for—"

But she wouldn't listen as she finished bandaging Ben's wound and then hurried to the house. After that, things became a trifle hazy for Ben. He found himself hanging weakly in the saddle, following Ruth Jewell who was mounted and leading the way through the stormy night.

Wind was roaring down the mountain now, driving the rain in a blinding rush. Wet brush slapped Ben in the face, and that helped to clear his mind so that he continued to hang to the saddlehorn.

Ben could tell by the laboring progress of the horse that they were climbing high and fast. At times a stream boomed in the darkness close at hand. After another few hours the horses stopped.

"Now," the girl spoke. She had dismounted, and was at his side. Ben half slid, half fell from the horse. He leaned heavily on her as they pushed through dripping thickets.

The onslaught of wind and rain was suddenly ended, though Ben heard the

(Continued on page 102)

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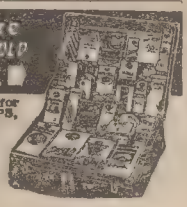

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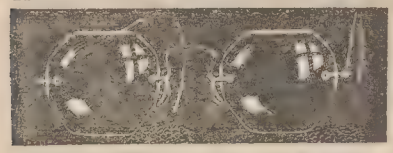

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(Continued from page 100)

storm booming through the timber beyond.

She lowered him to a rock. A match flared as the girl was lighting a candle. Its feeble gleam illuminated the rock walls and overhanging roof of a small dry, natural cave which they had entered. Its mouth, a score of feet away, was choked by buffalo brush.

Smoke-marks and a circle of rocks showed where fires had once been built in this hide-out. A heap of dry branches was piled nearby, and the girl soon had a fire blazing.

"Clem and I used to come here, playing outlaw, when we were kids," she said. "I haven't been here in more than a year. After Clem died I never wanted to—to see it again. It's just like I last left it—even to the firewood. Nobody but Clem, dad and I know where it is. . . . "

She hung a tarp over the entrance so that no betraying glint of firelight would be seen in the canyon. The smoke from the fire was carried along the roof and out of the entrance by a natural draft.

She brought the horses into the cave, tying them at the back, then brought a canteen of water from the stream. Stripping off Ben's slicker, she forced him to stretch out on a blanket by the fire while she washed and placed a new bandage on the wound in his side.

She nodded. "It made a fairly clean hole through a muscle. You'll be fit and ready to ride again in a week. But you don't feel so perky right at the minute do you?"

Ben's eyes were burning, and his face was flushed. Fever was raging within him. He found himself wanting to tell Ruth Jewell how sweet and brave and beautiful she was. He wanted to touch her glossy hair.

Her face, hovering over him seemed to swim around in the mists. At times it wasn't her face at all. It was the face of her brother, Clem Jewell, who was looking up at him as the waters of the Platte River closed over him.

So Ruth Jewell believed he had murdered her brother! The irony of that caused him to laugh wildly, as searing memories marched through his jumbled mind. . . .

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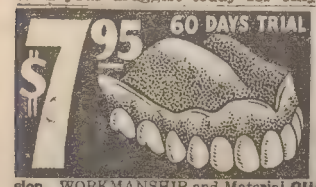

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HE had met Clem Jewell in Ogallala one August night, and had taken a liking to him. The young cowboy was hunting an experienced trail boss to take charge of the drive of feeder cattle headed for northern range. Ben, who had just rodded a beef drive up the trail from Texas, had agreed to help him out.

It was Clem Jewell who hired the four riders. Ben hadn't particularly cottoned to them, but good trail hands were none too plentiful, for the average Texas rider shunned the prospect of a trip northward at that late season. The four punchers who signed up with the drive were Jake Bealer, Spider Durkin, Roan Jenkins and the one called Jinglebob. Ben himself had prevailed on a veteran trail cook to handle the wagon.

They had headed up the Platte River along the first leg of the old Montana trail.

A week later, while they were sitting around the wagon eating their evening meal, the four killers drew their guns and opened up without a word of warning. They shot down Clem Jewell and the cook in cold blood, and shot Ben twice in the back before he could pick up his six-shooter.

It was a herd-stealing plot, carefully timed and mercilessly carried out. Clem Jewell and the cook were dead when their bodies were dropped into the Platte River with rocks tied to their ankles. And the killers believed Ben was dead too when they sunk his body in the river.

But Ben revived as the muddy water of the Platte closed over him. Managing to get out a pocket knife, he cut himself free from the rocks. More dead than alive he dragged himself from the river half a mile downstream with two bullets in his body.

A renegade breed trapper found him there in the river brush two days later. It was the trapper's fat, wrinkled Crow squaw, with her native herbs who nursed the spark of life back in Ben's body and fanned it to a feeble flame.

It was a month before Ben clearly remembered that murderous, unexpected blast of gunfire, and realized that Clem Jewell and the cook were dead, and that the herd had been stolen. More than an-

other month passed before he was strong enough to mount a horse. He had lost forty pounds, and looked ten years older.

Through outlaw friends of the trapper, he learned it was rumored in Ogallala that he had stolen the herd, and that the father of Clem Jewell was hunting him, aiming to kill him.

Jake Bealer and his three companions believed Ben was dead, and that they had pinned the crime on him. Ben decided to play the cards the way they lay, and had taken up the ghost trail in search of them.

▲ ▲ ▲

THE West was big, and the trail was cold and buried under the winter snows. Ben traveled a thousand miles up and down the country, riding the winter chuckline, and inquiring at every ranch and trappers' rendezvous for some clew to a bunch of cattle which had once worn a vented J Cross. The J Cross was the Texas-registered brand on the feeder herd Clem Jewell had bought in Ogallala.

He was losing hope as spring came, until he encountered a cowboy riding for a big outfit on Wind River. The cowpuncher recalled sighting a Texas herd which had trailed through the country in the fall. Some of the riders answered the descriptions of the four men Ben had on the list that was printed indelibly in his mind. The cattle, headed north, were wearing a freshly-burned Circle Cross 8 brand, according to the cowboy.

Ben consulted brand records and learned that the Circle Cross 8 was owned by a rancher named Moss Kern in the Chain Mountain country.

Arriving on Chain Mountain three days before, he had scouted the Circle Cross 8 ranch, and sighted all of the four men he sought riding with the winter crew. Scattered among the ten thousand head of cattle that Moss Kern grazed on the mountain was a generous sprinkling of long-legged, flanky steers with Sonora Red blood in their veins. Their lines and characteristics were unmistakable. Ben had found the missing J Cross herd, whose brand was easy to work into a Circle Cross 8.

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That was why Ben had rope-killed one of those Texas steers, and had cut out the brand, intending to scrape it down and make sure of the original mark, which would be deeper because it had been burned on when the animal was a calf.

Over and over Ben lived those past months. He didn't know that he was babbling aloud, or that he was struggling in a feverish delirium, and that Ruth Jewell was there, pleading with him to remain quiet.

And then he fell into a deep stupor, half exhaustion and half the aftermath of bullet shock and the long months of hardship he had undergone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Trigger Verdict

BEN slept like a dead man. Daybreak was stealing into the cave when his eyes opened. The rain had passed, and the wind had died, and the dawn was unnaturally still. The warmth of the fire repelled the biting chill that crept into the cave.

Ruth Jewell was sitting beside him. Her lips were wan, her eyes were swollen and red-rimmed. It might have been the drifting smoke from the fire that made her eyes look like that. Then again she might have been recently weeping.

She had a steaming tin cup in her hands which gave forth the savory aroma of beef broth.

Ben saw a quarter of beef lying back in the cave—the same one he had removed from her wagon the previous day.

"I rode over to Elk Creek before daybreak while you were asleep," she explained, "and got the slow-elk you took from the wagon and hid in the brush."

Ben got to an elbow. He felt as weak as a kitten, but the fever was gone, and the hot, steaming broth was like a tonic. He winced each time he moved, but he could feel strength surging through his sinews as he ate, while the girl watched him with a strange intensity.

Ben noticed two jagged pieces of green rawhide lying stretched on flat rocks at the back of the cave. One was the brand he had cut from the steer up near Chain

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.80	1.15
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Pass the previous day, and the other had come from the haunch of beef the girl had brought in. The inner sides of the hide had been scraped down with a knife so that the original brand welts showed plainly.

Ben got to his feet, staring grimly.

The girl's voice was tight, high-pitched. "Odd, isn't it, that I'd find under Moss Kern's brand the iron that was on the feeder herd my brother bought in Ogallala last summer?"

Their eyes met. She was fighting for self-control.

"So you know?" Ben said slowly.

She nodded. "I know—that you're Ben Brackett. You did some talking last night in your sleep. You were feverish."

"Yeah. I'm Ben Brackett, the man you hate, because Jake Bealer said I murdered your brother."

She began to laugh; wild, nerve-racking laughter that was not good to hear. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Hate you?" she echoed.

Then, amazingly, she was clinging tightly to him, burying her face against him. Her body was shaking convulsively. "Hate you?" she choked again. "God forgive me for that! Dad and I were blind. We should have suspected the truth when Jake Bealer showed up so very providentially, told us that story, then almost at once went to work for Moss Kern!"

Ben's arms were around her, holding her. "You know the truth about Clem?" he asked.

"You told the story yourself last night, but without realizing it. You lived it over again and again. You suffered through it time after time, until I felt so sorry for you that I cried. It's all plain enough now. Moss Kern must have been back of the whole rotten scheme. Kern knew we had sent Clem to buy feeder cattle, for he'd already bought up the notes we had signed against the ranch. It's a cinch that he bribed Jake Bealer and the others to murder Clem and you and the cook, and steal the herd.

"They rebranded the steers on the trail, and then had the brazen impudence to bring them up here and graze them on the very range we'd just lost to Kern.

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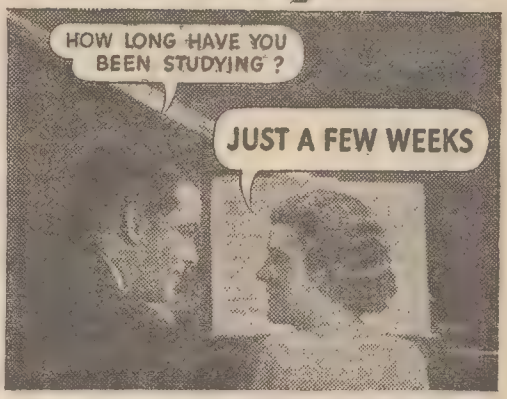

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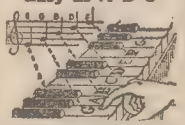

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The evidence has been here before our eyes all the time. But we never suspected, because we hadn't seen the cattle, and didn't know what to look for."

Ben turned, hearing a sound in the brush at the entrance to the cave. The canvas tarp was roughly jerked aside, and Hack Jewell stood there a cocked six-shooter in his fist.

□ □ □

HIS seamy face contorted into a gray hate-twisted mask, he stood glaring at Ben. "Makin' love to the sister o' the boy you shot down in cold blood!" he snarled. "Stand away from him, Ruth. This man's name ain't Bill Cain; it's Ben Brackett. I learned the truth an hour ago. Moss Kern an' a couple o' his riders came back to the house at daybreak an' palavered with me. He shot Jake Bealer so Bealer couldn't identify him as Clem's murderer. An' now I find my own daughter in his arms!"

Hack Jewell's finger tightened on the trigger. Ben tried to thrust the girl out of his line of fire, but instead she struggled to keep between him and the gun.

"No!" she screamed, and leaped toward her father, pushing his gun-muzzle up just as it exploded. The bullet thudded into the rock roof of the cave. "Dad! Dad! Listen to me. Ben Brackett's innocent. Look at those brands on these two pieces of rawhide. See the J Cross underneath the Circle Cross 8? That proves that Moss Kern engineered Clem's murder as well as the theft of the herd!"

She forced her father to look at the evidence, and swiftly told the story.

Before she had finished Hack Jewell began to wilt. He pushed the gun back into a holster with a trembling hand, and the hatred faded out of his face, leaving him old and bewildered.

Ben stood watching with narrowed eyes. Now he spoke. "So Moss Kern told you I was Ben Brackett?" he said thoughtfully. He was silent a minute, then his voice sharpened. "Were you trailed when you pulled out from the ranch to come here and peel my scalp?"

Hack Jewell blinked, and was suddenly startled. The girl, realizing what Ben

was driving at, uttered a gasp of dismay.

"That's right! It may have been a trick, Dad," she breathed. "They could have stampeded you into leading them here to the hide-out. They may have guessed that you'd know where Ben was. They know they've got to kill Ben, because Moss Kern is back of Clem's death. He'd stop at nothing to protect himself, and—"

Ben motioned her into silence. And through that silence they heard faint movement in the brush outside.

Ben picked up his six-shooter and moved noiselessly toward the tarp. The girl tried to stop him, but he pushed her back. There was a faint, twisted smile on his lips.

He flattened against a wall, then jerked the tarp from its fastenings.

The crawling forms of two men were in the brush at the mouth of the cave. And a pace behind them were two more skulking figures.

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ONE of the men near the entrance was Spider Durkin, and the other was a purple-nosed, icy-eyed big man with a pearl-handled six-shooter in his fist—Moss Kern himself.

They stared for a startled instant at Ben. Then six-shooters thundered.

Ben was shooting fast. Bullets tugged at the loose bandage Ruth Jewell had wrapped around him, and a slug brushed through his hair. He saw Spider Durkin drop flat on his face, draw up his knees in agony, then straighten out convulsively.

Back of Durkin, Ben sighted the slovenly, mud-stained figure of Jinglebob. He fired twice and saw him pitch backwards into a thicket.

Hack Jewell's Frontier Colt was bellowing also as he yelled, "Kern, you snake. You tricked me into leadin' you here so you could wipe out Ben Brackett an' me an' even Ruth!"

Hack Jewell was shooting as he talked, lying behind a boulder near the cave entrance. And Moss Kern's body was vibrating to the impact of the four slugs the enraged old-timer poured into him.

Then, at a word from Ben, he and the maddened rancher charged from the cave. Three more of Kern's tough hands were in the brush, but they had seen the way

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death swept like a scythe through their leaders, and they plunged away through the thickets, shooting back as they fled.

Spider Kern and Moss Kern were dead. Jinglebob was groaning in the brush. The man began to whine for mercy as Ben bent over him.

"I didn't have no hand in the killin' that night on the Platte, Brackett," Jinglebob panted. "Don't kill me. I'll tell the whole story in court. It was Jake Bealer an' Spider an' Roan Jenkins who did the shootin'. They made me string along with 'em. Moss Kern paid Jake Bealer an' Spider a thousand dollars apiece to steal that herd. It was Kern an' some of his riders that helped shove the drive up in the Wind River country where we branded 'em, and drove 'em to his range up here. I'll talk. . . ."

Ruth came to Ben's side and leaned against him. He brought up horses that had belonged to men who would never ride again.

"Better fetch the sheriff, Hack," he said, his face gray and drawn from the wound in his side that was giving him hell. "Let the bodies lie just where they fell. The hills are full of evidence. I can identify the biggest part of that stolen herd, and cut them out of Kern's cattle when all of his stock are rounded up. The court will award that bunch of steers to you. And you can claim heavy damages from Kern's estate—enough to put the Anchor 9 back on its feet."

"But not enough to bring Clem back," Hack Jewell said as he wearily mounted.

The girl's hand closed on Ben's. She leaned against him for a moment, and then was in his arms, clinging tightly to him.

Ben saw Hack Jewell's chin lift a little as the old man turned in the saddle and watched his daughter in Ben's arms. Ben smiled a little. Hack Jewell must be thinking about the son he'd lost, and that sadness would always be in his heart. But perhaps he was realizing, too, that he had gained another son—one who would fight to restore the glory of the Anchor 9.

THE END

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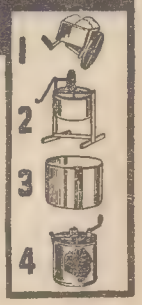

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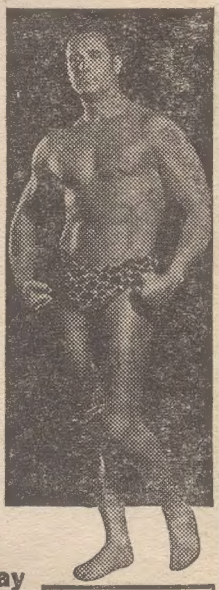
Charles Atlas



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Holder of title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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(Continued from page 81)

THE marshal found Benny in the cemetery, all right, standing head-down by five freshly dug, extra-long graves off to themselves alone on one side of the little sagebrush field at the edge of town. And the lawman grinned in spite of himself when he saw the manner in which Benny had marked those graves.

The youth had run a stick in and out of each torn greenback, in the way that a gardener runs sticks through his seed packets and stands them at the head of his rows to mark them. Each new-made grave was marked in this fashion with a tiny greenback flag.

But the marshal's grin faded when he saw Benny's face.

"Don't grieve now, Benny," the marshal said awkwardly, fumbling for words of consolation. "Them boys died like they wanted to—in a good fight, for a hell of a good cause. This here is cow country again, an' I reckon she allus will be now. You've settled that. The squatters that wasn't killed have straddled their hosses an' rode down to Blazon where they can flag a train. The Piney Hills is open to cows again, an' the country'll go on bein' like it ought.

"You boys all did a mighty good job, an' the rest of 'em would be proud o' you for the way you held yore end up."

"I reckon," Benny said, controlling his voice and blinking against the tears that wouldn't leave his eyes, "t-that's just it. I ain't grievin' over pa an' the boys. They'd ride back an' haunt me, if I did. But—well, hell, they said I couldn't hold my likker. They didn't see me back there. An' they'll never know any d-different."

The slow smile came back to the lawman's thin, gray face.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled!" he said softly, half to himself and half to the world at large. "The squatters had me worried about this here country. Fearin' I guess that the cowmen was dyin' off like their cows has been doin'. Fearin' we had somethin' ahead that was different. . . .

"But hell, Benny," the marshal added confidentially, "cowmen don't never die!"

THE END

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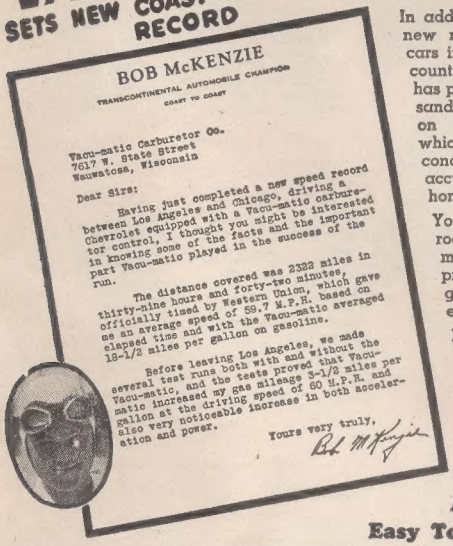

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